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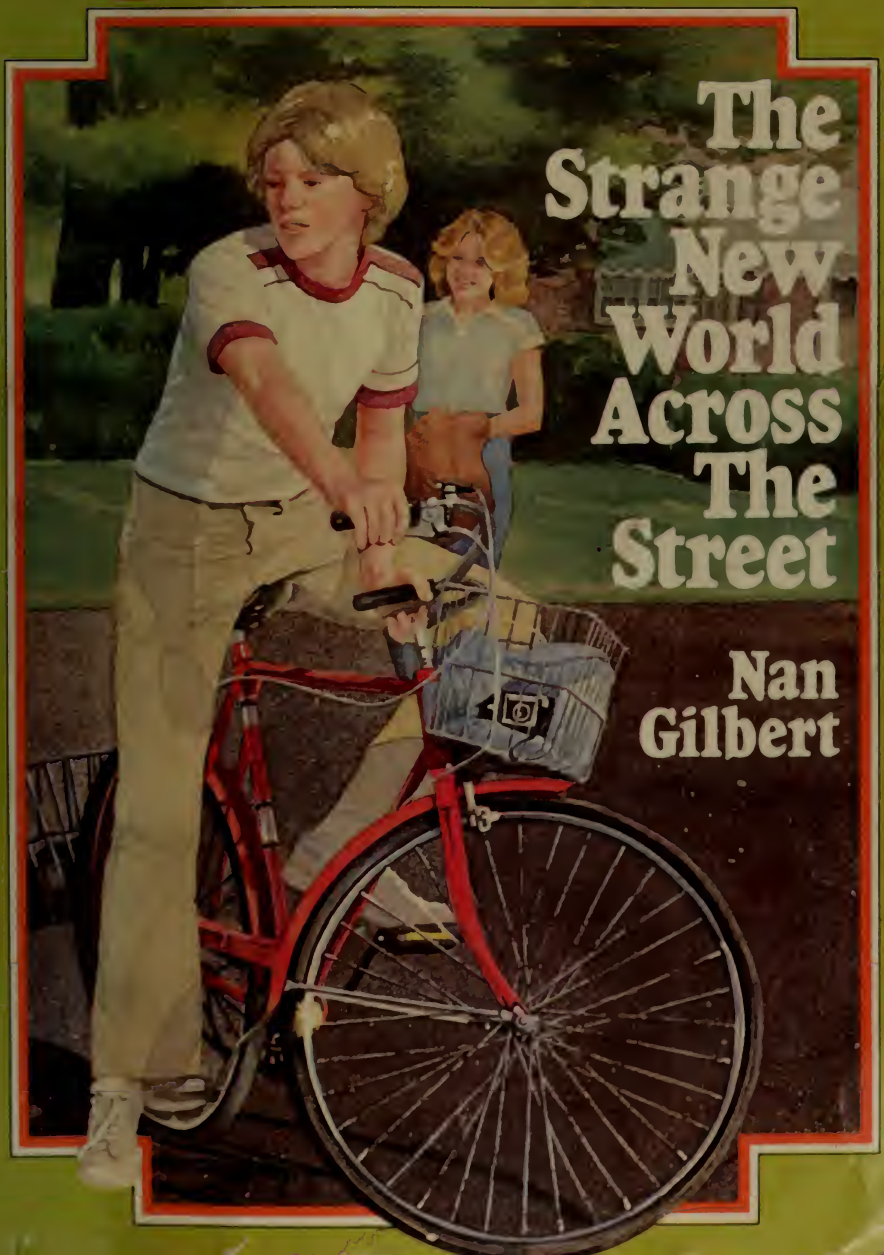

Lisa Daviet
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The Strange New World Across The Street

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Nan Gilbert

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To Jan
who helped mightily

1

Ol' Janet came out of her house and right away looked over here. I didn't even have time to duck.

"Robbie," she called, "hasn't your Dad come *yet?*"

Since it was a silly question, I didn't bother to answer, just glowered at the tips of my tennis shoes. Anybody else would see I didn't want to talk, but not ol' Janet.

She hopped down her steps and out to the curb. "Robbie, d'you want to ride with us?"

"Nope," I said.

"It won't be a bit out of our way. Timmy's team is playing at Roosevelt today, too."

"Well, goody for Tim," I muttered.

"Wha-at? What'd you say, Robbie?"

"Nothin'!" I yelled.

"Robbie, it's getting pretty late." As though we didn't have clocks at our house, too. As though I I didn't know good and well it was getting late; why else would I be so mad? "You better come with us, Robbie. Papa's leaving in just a minute."

"Yeah?" I said, putting as much sarcasm into it as one word would hold. I've got to admit, if it had been her Mom driving, I might've let her persuade me to go along. But her Dad—boy, oh, boy, never again! Not after that time last week when I heard him bellow, "What d'ya mean I've got to take him? When did I get elected his nursemaid?"

Janet was right there and heard him, too. She knew blamed well why I wasn't accepting any more lifts from that guy. But that just made it a problem, and giving ol' Janet a problem is like giving a beagle a bone; she'll worry about it and gnaw it and bury it and dig it up again till it's worn out. Or cracked open.

Now she started across the street, talking fast. "But Robbie, if you don't go with us, how're you going to get there?"

I got a good grip on the catcher's mitt and sweatshirt in my lap. I wouldn't have put it past bossy ol' Janet to just plain pick 'em up and carry 'em off.

But she stopped short of the porch steps and stood there, arms folded, forehead wrinkled in that familiar let's-figure-out-an-answer-to-this expression that always drives me nuts. "Don't be silly, Robbie. What's your team going to do without a catcher?"

"They got Matthew," I reminded her. "Thinks

he's so much, let *him* get his knuckles banged up for a change."

"Oh, Robbie, you know he drops the ball more times than he catches it!"

"Hah!" I said. That was one point we could agree on.

But now, suddenly, *she* got mad. "Well, I think it's pretty mean of you to let your team down," she said, and, haughty as all get-out, stalked back across the street, climbed into the car in her driveway and slammed the door.

Well, if that wasn't like a girl! Here I was left with my mouth hanging open, and all the words I could've said boiling inside me. So I was letting the team down, was I? Well, how about me being let down? I suppose that didn't matter, huh? I suppose it was perfectly all right for Dad to make a promise and then break it; I shouldn't let it bother me one bit, huh? Now if the team lost, it was all my fault, huh? Nobody else's. Certainly not Dad's. Hah!

Across the street, the front door banged open and Mr. Kernan burst out, yelling something over his shoulder. ". . . won't have time to stop at the store. Better send Junie. Get a move on, kids!"

Janet's two younger brothers, Timmy and Mike, spilled out of the house and steamed for the car. Mr. Kernan loped after them. Mrs. Kernan ran out the door, wigwagging for attention and not getting any. "Thomas Junior won't be home in time!"

Mr. Kernan didn't hear. He was already behind the wheel, roaring the engine. The car screeched backward down the drive. He cut the wheel too

short and bounced over the curb. The kids in the car squealed. Mrs. Kernan lifted her arms and dropped them helplessly.

I watched it all like you'd watch a play. The Kernans were more like characters in a play than any real-life people I'd known up to now, either out here in Apple Valley or back in Iowa where I'd lived with Grandma and Grandpa 'most all my life.

Like, for instance, those Kernan kids were the *goingest* bunch—even Mike, for Pete's sake, and he wasn't out of kindergarten yet! Errands, jobs, clubs, teams, visits . . . something in the works every minute, and all of it seemed really important from the dust it raised. Lots of times their own parents lost track of where the kids were.

But they didn't act at all upset when that happened. Mrs. Kernan would come out and halloo for the missing one, and maybe she or Mr. Kernan would hop in the car and go honking around the neighborhood. But even when they came home without the kid, they didn't do anything about it, just went in and ate whatever meal they'd been calling him to. Wow, if it'd been *me* that was missing, Grandma would've been on the phone in one second flat, calling the police!

Mrs. Kernan was looking my way. I picked up my gear in a hurry and scrambled backwards to the door. Too late.

"Robert," she called (Mrs. Kernan always used a kid's full name, as though a nickname sort of belittled him), "aren't you playing today?"

"Later," I mumbled. "Waitin' for Dad." It wasn't

polite to bolt into the house while she was still talking, but I kept my hand on the doorknob.

"Well, I was just thinking, if you're not leaving yet, maybe you'd have time—"

"Telephone—'scuse me—gotta answer!" Polite or not, I had to get inside the house before she could ask me to go to the store. I'd been to the store for Mrs. Kernan before, and boy, it was awful! I mean, if she'd just plain written out a list I could give to the storekeeper, it would've been different. But Mrs. Kernan's lists look like Morse code. You got to figure out each item and then sing it out, loud and clear (Mr. Bertleson's a little deaf).

And what would *you* do if you heard a big guy, almost eleven, shouting for blue eye shadow and spray deodorant? Haw-haw right out loud? You bet you would. And that's what the other customers in the store did.

But if I didn't want to run errands, I was stuck with hiding in the house on a swell afternoon—drat it! Grumpy and disgusted, I stomped upstairs to put away my mitt and sweatshirt. No use pretending any more that Dad was suddenly going to remember the game and come hurtling home for me. When Dad forgot, he *FORGOT*.

It'd sure been different back where I lived before. Grandpa never forgot. Even if he had an important meeting downtown at the bank, you just knew he'd be at the curb, tooting his horn, a good five minutes early to get me to Scouts or 4-H or bowling or whatever.

Grandma would be posted at the front door,

watching for the car. "There's your grandfather," she'd say, and hand me whatever I was supposed to take along—bowling shoes or my Scout manual or picnic sack or extra sweater. "Now remember, Grandpa will be waiting to pick you up afterwards," as though I wasn't as sure of it as I was of tomorrow's sunrise.

Thinking about Grandma and Grandpa was the wrong thing to do on a day that had gone as sour as this one. First thing I knew, there was a fog between me and the window. I swiped at my eyes with both fists. Bawling, for Pete's sake! I must've really hit bottom.

But I missed them. Not all the time; I could forget for days at a time that I'd ever lived any place but Apple Valley. Then all of a sudden—like now—a big wave of lonesomeness for the little farm town, for the old brick house with the deep front porch and the creaking swing, and especially for Grandpa and Grandma, would come rolling up and just plain swamp me.

"Golly," I said out loud to the window that was foggy again, "I wish I could go home."

2

Trouble was, this place was home. This little build-as-you-go house. This woodsy suburb that was nice enough till you wanted to go someplace—school or the store or a movie—and found you practically needed a map and a wagon train to get there. Apple Valley, Oregon—this was home. Not Summit, Iowa. The judge had said so. More important, Grandma and Grandpa had said so.

"Your home is with your father," Grandma said. Real firmly, considering how her voice wobbled. (Grandma's voice had wobbled quite a bit that last week while she packed my things.) "Your home is with your father. Naturally. There was no reason for him to go to court about it. We were always perfectly willing to send you to him when he could provide a proper home and care."

That was back in March, almost three months ago. Grandma and Grandpa were going to bring me out to Oregon themselves, but Grandma wasn't up to the trip. She wouldn't hear of my flying alone, though littler kids than me did it all the time. . . .

"What could happen to him?" Grandpa asked. "It's a nonstop flight. We can ask the stewardess to keep an eye on him."

"A young girl like that!" Grandma cried. "What if he became ill? Would she know what to do? . . ."

So they got Mrs. Wexler to go with me.

Mrs. Wexler was just like family. She was a practical nurse who moved in with us whenever somebody was sick. I liked her a lot. She was as good at boardgames as another kid, and told such great stories you almost didn't notice the pills and cough medicine and shots she slipped into you between sentences.

That was her first flight, and wow, was she excited!

"Look at that! Look at that!" she'd sing out, whether it was a toy-size farm she saw, or a lake like a blue cup in the mountains, or a cloud bank of pink cotton fluff. Boy, she could've tipped over the plane, the way she had passengers from the other side scrambling over to look out our window! And then every now and then she'd sigh and say, "Oh, Robbie, if everybody could see the earth from up here, surely they'd take better care of it, wouldn't they?"

The hours on the plane were like an in-between world. There was the old familiar world back in Summit, and there was the new and kind of scary

world ahead in Apple Valley. But between them was this King's X space of sky and plane. I was sorry when it was time to land.

Funny, though—once I was on the ground again, it was Grandma and Grandpa's home that seemed long ago and far away. Like I'd dreamed it, maybe. But it was a nice dream. Warm and happy. Full of love and care and good things to eat...

My stomach growled. It reminded me I hadn't had any lunch, and now it was the middle of the afternoon. The game must be half over. I wondered how the Birds were doing. We hadn't won a game yet; the team was pretty small and slow. That goof, Matthew—how many times had he boggled the signals by now? I sort of wished I'd caught a ride with the Kernans, in spite of what Mr. Kernan had said. (After all, I knew he hadn't really meant it. He always sputtered a lot, and Janet had been pestering him, about his *having* to give me a ride.)

My stomach rumbled louder. I thought, "If Grandma heard that, I bet she'd ask the judge to send me right back."

It wasn't a brand-new thought. Every now and then, when things went sour here, I'd get it out of hiding and sneak a look at it. I mean, I'm not dumb. Or deaf, either. I'd heard that "proper-home-and-care" bit so many times, it was practically tattooed on my brain. I knew it had a lot to do with who got custody of me.

For instance, look what all Dad did to show he could provide it. He was a free-lance photographer; that means he just took the pictures he wanted to

take, and hoped they'd sell or win him a prize or something. But proper home and care meant having a steady income. So he'd gone out and got a job (part time, anyway) with a photography studio. (He hated it, too.)

Then he'd hired Mrs. Moffett to come in every afternoon except weekends to tidy up and make dinner. Before I came, Dad cooked for himself, and swept out the house (he said) only when it was *in extremis,* whatever that means.

And wow, he practically took the house apart and put it together again to give me a room of my own (that's part of the "proper home" business, too). You see, it's just a little house. There'd been a second bedroom downstairs, once upon a time, but a long time ago Dad had turned it into a darkroom where he could develop his pictures.

So what he did was finish off the attic space. And I mean he really went all out; it looked like something out of Grandma's *Better Homes and Gardens* magazines. Double bunks, study table, bookshelves, lots of color and light. He'd cut dormer windows into two sides of the room, but on the third side, the window was a door; you could walk right out onto a little porch.

Dad seemed especially proud of that porch. He'd gone out on it right away and given the railings a shake to show me how strong they were.

"Thought you might like sleeping out here sometimes," he'd said. "Always liked sleeping outdoors myself. Got you a sleeping bag, in case you didn't have one."

I stared at him, too surprised to answer. I mean, it was like I'd just found out my father was a stranger.

Finally I said, "I catch colds."

"Well, sure," Dad said. "I didn't mean in midwinter. Wouldn't be too bad right now, though..." He'd lifted his head and taken a deep breath. "Boy, fill your lungs with that!"

I wondered if he was maybe a little nuts. I wondered if my grandparents knew. "It's raining," I pointed out, in case he hadn't noticed.

"Call this rain?" Dad scoffed. "This is just Oregon mist!" But he followed me back inside and we went on with our tour of the house.

Dad saved the garage till the last. I knew there was something special about it by the way he flung open the connecting door from the kitchen and stood back to let me go first.

But for a long minute I couldn't see what it was. The space was pretty much filled with tools and a mower and lawn furniture, so Dad's little car was sitting out in the driveway. Rain blew in through the open doors.

"Like it?" Dad asked.

"Yeh. Sure"—and then I spotted what "it" was. In the far corner of the garage was a bicycle, brand new from the looks of it. Fire-engine red. Baskets front and back, speedometer, headlight, horn.

Dad sprinted ahead of me to squeeze the bulb on the horn. "Hear that?" he asked, eager as a kid. "That's an old taxi horn; my first flivver had a horn like that."

"Yeh," I said. I was choked again with that awful feeling that this guy was a stranger. "Only I can't ride a bike."

"Oh, shucks, you'll learn in no time! Just wheel it out on the driveway and I'll start you off—"

I explained carefully, like you would to a child, "I know *how* to ride, but I *can't* ride. It makes me wheeze."

"Huh?" Dad looked as if he'd been hit in the face with a pillow and left with a mouthful of feathers.

"Asthma," I spelled it out for him even more carefully. "Last time I rode a bike—that was a couple of years ago—I had a real bad asthma attack, and Grandma gave away my bicycle."

"Well, yeh, sure," Dad floundered among the feathers for words. "But it could've been something else triggered the attack, couldn't it? . . . and anyway that was a long time ago. You're a lot bigger and stronger now."

"Yeh," I agreed. It was the easiest answer to make, and besides, you had to be polite to strangers.

The bike had stayed right where it was from that day to this.

3

Downstairs a screen door slammed, and I heard Dad whistling, loud and happy, as he went into the darkroom to put away his stuff. Dad always banged around the house like a kid out of school when picture-taking had been good.

I clumped downstairs and sat on the bottom step, elbows on knees, chin on balled fists. The louder Dad whistled, the madder I got. The whistle said plain as printed words that he hadn't given the game a thought. He'd come home because he was good and ready, not because he'd remembered his promise.

The whistle came closer; Dad slammed the darkroom door and crossed the living room on his way to the kitchen. He almost missed me completely—

just walked right past—then, in the kitchen doorway, he did a double take and spun around.

"Hey! What're you doing in the house on a great day like this? You feeling okay?"

I gave him the stoniest glare I could muster. "You forgot the game," I said, and for good measure added, "again."

"The game? What ga—ulllp!" Dad about strangled on the word. "Da-darned if I didn't! Lord, Robbie, I'm sorry. Couldn't you catch a ride with the Kernans?"

I wasn't going to repeat what Mr. Kernan had said. So, with frosty edges around the word, I just said, "No."

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" Dad's good cheer was totally flattened. He ran a hand through his hair, messing it more than it already was and leaving a black strand hanging over his nose. Dad forgot about haircuts for weeks and weeks. "Well, why in—ketunket didn't you call a taxi?"

I gaped at him. "Huh?"

"A taxi, a taxi! There's money in the desk, isn't there? I always leave some for emergencies—"

"Call a taxi?" I said, not believing my ears. "To go to the game?"

"Well, you got any better ideas?" Dad flapped his hands, sort of helpless and impatient.

I couldn't think of a word to say. I'd been ready for him to suggest the Kernans; I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd suggested the bike—though he didn't do that much any more. But—call a taxi!

"Robbie! Hey, Robbie!" The Kernan car squawled to a stop in their driveway. "*Robbie!*"

"Sounds pretty important," Dad said. Anybody could see he was glad for the interruption. "Better go see what Janet wants."

He went on out to the kitchen. I could hear doors and drawers banging and silverware rattling and his whistle piping up again. Maybe it wasn't as cheery as before, but it was still a whistle.

It spelled out what I'd already guessed: Dad had won the argument—if you could call it an argument. Only how did it happen? He'd forgotten his promise, hadn't he? I had a perfect right to be sore, didn't I? Then how could he end up whistling, and leave me feeling somehow in the wrong?

"*Robbie!*"

Sizzling with indignation, I went out to see what was on ol' Janet's mind.

She came tearing across the street. "Robbie, guess what?"

"Well, what?"

"The Early Birds won! They won, Robbie! Isn't it exciting? Aren't you happy? And you know *how* they won? . . . Tubby Pendleton hit a home-run in the last inning!"

"Awww—" She had to be making it up. "Tubby can't even run a base 'thout falling down!"

"Well, he fell down all right, but it didn't matter 'cause the ball was over the fence."

Tubby Pendleton hitting a ball over the fence? Most times he didn't even get the bat off his shoulder. "You got to be kidding."

"No, I'm not. I was right there. I saw it." When ol' Janet got excited, she bounced like a kangaroo—up and down, up and down, her long yellow hair flapping like a sheet in the wind. She was making me dizzy.

"Pete's sake, can'tcha stand still?" I yelped at her. By now, I was so mixed up, I didn't know *how* I felt. I mean, nothing was going right today. I'm not saying the Birds couldn't win without me—'course they could—but it shouldn't have been *Tubby* who brought them in.

"Gol*lee!*" I squawked, and kicked a rock so hard I bruised my toe. And now it was me hopping around on one foot.

Janet got the wrong idea about why I was mad. She quit bouncing and gave my arm a little pat. "It's a shame you missed it, Robbie." I shook her off and limped away. She followed right after me, chattering faster than a squirrel.

"I went over first off to see if you'd got there," she said. When Timmy's league, the PeeWees, played at the far end of the same ball park we were using, ol' Janet chalked up more miles than a track team, loping back and forth to watch both games. "And then you didn't come and you didn't come—and the game was so close—only the Birds were always behind and I didn't see how they'd ever catch up. And then, their last time at bat, Matthew got a walk—"

"Matthew!" Bad enough for Tubby to hit a home run, but did Matthew have to get in on the hero act, too?

Janet was off on her kangaroo hops again. "—and

then it was Tubby's turn and he let a couple go by, and . . . I don't really know *what* happened then. The ball came kind of close—maybe Tubby thought it was going to hit him. Anyway, he backed up a step and sort of swiped at it, like he was brushing off a bee with his bat, you know? And the ball sailed over the fence, and Matthew and Tubby both came in, and that was the game! Oh, why weren't you there, Robbie?"

On top of everything else, that question was just too much. "Why d'ya *suppose* I wasn't there?" I bawled at her. " 'Cause Dad forgot about the game again! Just came home a minute ago, whistling like a—like a dumb ol' skylark or something! Never thought about the game once!"

If I'd expected her to feel sorry for me, I sure was wrong. Ol' Janet suddenly squared off in front of me, as mad as I was, but not for the same reason.

"You knew all the time he'd forget" she scolded. "You knew it! You were just waiting for him to forget again! I bet you even keep count how many times he forgets!"

I spluttered, "I s'pose you think I didn't *want* to go to the game!"

"Well, if you'd wanted to bad enough, you'd have got there."

"How?" I yelled. She knew as well as Dad why I wouldn't ride the bike. And it was a cinch *she* wouldn't come up with that goofy taxi idea. "Just tell me how *you'd* have got there, smarty?"

"I'd have—I'd have—" It was pretty hard to catch ol' Janet without an answer. Now she floundered

only a couple of seconds before saying, "I'd have hitchhiked."

"Wha-a-at?"

"Well, not really hitchhiked, 'cause you're not supposed to ride with strangers. But I'd have started running—like it was terribly important, you know? I'm sure somebody I knew would've come along . . ."

"Hah, fat chance!" But I didn't sound as certain as I'd have liked to. Drivers here were nice about offering rides, maybe because it was so blamed far from one place to another. And—at this end of town, anyway—'most everybody knew 'most everybody else (and there wasn't anybody didn't know the Kernan kids!). I said loftily, "That's a pretty silly idea. You'd have got there all winded, and prob'ly not till the last inning anyway."

"Well, I'd have got there," she said with great dignity.

And she would have. I knew it as well as I knew I'd lost this argument, too. It just wasn't my day. The Birds had won without me; Dad seemed to think it was my own fault I hadn't got there; and now ol' Janet was acting the very same way. Fine friend she was!

I swung back my foot—the one that wasn't already sore—to give the grass a good kick.

"No, Robbie!" Janet sang out and swooped down to cover something with her hands. I tried to stop my kick in mid-swing, lost my balance and sat down, plop. Now more than my toe hurt.

"Whatcha have to do that for?" I yelped.

Janet opened her cupped hands to look anxiously at a clumsy old beetle. "You were going to kick it."

"Aw, I wasn't either. Didn't even see it." I leaned over for a closer look. "Just an old June bug. Back in Iowa, they kill 'em so they won't eat the crops."

Janet crouched lower over the June bug. "This isn't farm country. It won't hurt anything."

"Well, okay. So let it go," I said. "Prob'ly heading for that tree. They like to eat leaves. 'Long about twilight, if you see snips of leaves falling from a tree, you'll know some June bug's up there, having supper."

"Honest?" Ol' Janet gave a big sigh and smiled at me like I'd just handed her first-prize in a beauty contest. "That's nice," she said. "I'll watch for them. Oh, Robbie, you know everything!"

All of a sudden, the day didn't seem so bad. I felt kind of warm inside me, like the sun was just coming up, and—for a minute anyway—everything took on a reflected glow. This sprawled-out town and the mountains scowling behind it. This gone-to-weeds yard and patchwork house. Ol' Janet and her whole family in their wacky world across the street. Even Mr. Kernan.

Even Dad.

4

Dad came out on the front porch. "Just starting to fix supper," he said. "Janet, do you want to eat with us? It's hash."

It was always hash on Saturday night. Dad's recipe never varied: toss all the week's leftover meat, potatoes and vegetables into a big frying pan, add a chopped onion, and heat until brown and crisp.

"Yes," Janet accepted promptly.

"Well, go ask your mom," Dad said.

"It'll be fine with her," said Janet.

"Ask her anyway," Dad said, very firmly.

I went along with her. The Kernan house was always jumping; I mean, something exciting always seemed to be in the works. But this evening you'd have thought the roof would sail off with the big draft of noise rising under it.

Timmy and Mike and Mrs. Kernan and Mr. Kernan all shouted at Janet the minute she came in, "He got a scholarship, Janet! Junie got a scholarship! Janet, Janet, Junie gets to go!"

Ol' Janet screamed right along with the rest of them. "Isn't that super? Did you hear that, Robbie? Junie got a scholarship!"

"Yeh?" I said. How could I tell whether it was super or not? As far as I knew, scholarships were for college, and Junie wasn't anywhere near out of high school yet. "Scholarship for what?"

"For Outward Bound!" Janet yelled. "What he's been working and working for! Oh, isn't it thrilling?"

You couldn't prove it by me. I didn't know what she was talking about. I joggled her elbow and said, "How about supper?"

She gave me a glazed look, like she couldn't remember what food was, so I went on back home.

Dad was in the kitchen. "I don't think she's coming," I told him. And then I took a big sniff. "What's cooking?"

"The hash," said Dad—which I could see for myself. He leaned over the pan and sniffed and stirred and frowned. "Everything I put in was perfectly good by itself," he said, "but I'm not too sold on how it goes together."

I held my nose and took a closer look. "Why is it pink?"

"That's the beets. Mrs. Moffett fixed 'em Thursday, remember? Some fancy dish."

"Yeh." I made a face. "We didn't like 'em then, either."

Dad said, "I thought they'd sort of blend in, but they come right through, don't they? What the heck did she cook with those beets?" He took another sniff. "Cabbage, maybe? Sour cream?" He shook his head. "It was real dandy hash, right up to the beets. Well . . ." Resignedly, he scraped the pink hash into the garbage can. "What we need around here is a dog. A big hungry dog. How about it, Robbie—shall we get us a dog?"

For a minute, over the hash, we'd almost been friends. Now he was a stranger again.

"Dog hair makes me wheeze," I reminded him. He should've known; Grandma had given him the whole dreary list that I'd learned by heart back in kindergarten. I sing-songed it now, "Dog hair, cat hair, feathers, wool, dust, pollen . . ."

"Oh, Robbie . . ." Dad slammed the pan down in the sink and ran water into it. I didn't know whether he was mad at himself for spoiling the hash, or at me for spoiling his fun. Did he ever wish he'd left me with Grandma and Grandpa (that was another of the very private thoughts I sneaked a look at now and then), and just come visiting twice a year like before? Maybe he wouldn't really be sorry if they tried to get me back. Maybe he'd even be a little relieved.

Janet walked in and immediately asked, "What's cooking?"

"You mean what *was* cooking," Dad said gloomily. "The memory sure lingers on, doesn't it?"

Janet went over and lifted the lid of the garbage can and studied the pink hash. Then she put the lid back on and said politely, "You make lovely pancakes, Mr. Foskett."

Dad had been looking solemn as a molting owl, but at that he gave a shout of laughter. "I hope you're planning to go into the diplomatic corps when you grow up," he told Janet. "Your country needs you." He began setting out the mixing bowl, and griddle.

Ol' Janet prowled around, looking into the cupboards and refrigerator. I thought, boy, she sure makes herself right at home! But what really bothered me was how things had started picking up as soon as she walked in. She and Dad hit it off just great.

Now she said, "Would you like me to make cheese franks? They cook in the oven, so I wouldn't be in your way."

Dad said gratefully, "What a woman! How come you know so much about cooking at your tender age, Janet?"

"At our house, you just better know how to cook," said Janet, "or you'd starve. Everybody gets home different times, and sometimes everything's eaten up. Anyway, all us kids can cook ourselves a meal if we have to."

That sounded pretty braggy to me. I thought I'd take her down a peg. "Hah! I s'pose Mike cooks, too!"

"Oh, yes," she said, looking surprised that I'd

doubt it. " 'Course his meals mostly come out of cans, but that's okay."

I was sure I had her there. I hooted, "I s'pose he can read the labels, huh?"

"No," said Janet, serious as a schoolteacher with a dumb kid, "but 'most everything Mike likes has pictures on the labels."

Now it was Dad who hooted. Just one snort, but my ears flamed because anybody could tell what he was thinking: *Well, that's news to Robbie—he's never looked at a can, let alone opened one!*

Right that minute, I hated them both—so buddy-buddy getting supper there together, making fun of a dumb bunny who'd starve if you didn't set a dish of food in front of him. *Think they're so smart,* I muttered to myself. *What's so great about knowing how to cook?*

"Mr. Foskett," Janet suddenly remembered her big news, "d'you know what? Junie got a scholarship for Outward Bound!"

"He did?" Dad dropped the pancake turner and clapped her on the shoulder. "No kidding? A big enough scholarship so he can go? Oh, that's great—just great! When does he leave? Where's he going—the Cascades?"

I glared at the two of them, shouting and beaming at each other like it was Christmas morning. The day had been piling up on me like a tower of blocks, one block on top of another on top of another on top of another. Now this was one block too many. I mean, wouldn't you know Dad would understand what the excitement was all about without having

to ask stupid questions? It was like everybody spoke the same language—except me.

The tower was toppling; I had to get out from under before I was squashed like a bug. I pushed past them and walked out the door to the garage. They didn't ask where I was going; maybe they didn't even see me go.

I wheeled the bike out into the driveway and swung aboard.

5

Being mad put zip into my muscles. I didn't care where I went, or how much push it took to get there, just so I got good and far away from that kitchen.

I must've huffed and puffed more than a mile before I stopped for breath. Wow, was it ever hard work pedaling that bike! Sure, I was out of practice, but . . .

That much out of practice?

I got off and kicked the tires. Squashy soft, wouldn't you know it? Darn bike had been sitting around the garage since March—and maybe longer.

"Maybe a lot longer!" I was disgusted with myself for not thinking of it sooner. "Bet he bought it soon as he started that custody business."

It'd be just like him. Dad's the kind of guy who says, *Believe in a thing hard enough, and you can*

make it happen. He'd bring the bicycle home right off, just to show how sure he was that I'd be coming later.

So what was I going to do—go home? Bet they hadn't even missed me yet! Or keep going till I came to a gas station? Had to be one soon. On the way into town, they sprouted like mushrooms on every other corner. 'Course, I was headed out of town...

I didn't care. I wasn't turning back, even if I *never* got air in the blamed tires. I swung back on the bike and puffed another mile, getting glummer by the minute. Those soft tires made the bike weigh a ton. And boy, was I hungry! No lunch, no supper—I was hollow down to my toes.

A car whizzed past. The driver yelled, "Hey, kid, where's your light?"

I'd been pumping so hard—and thinking even harder—I hadn't noticed how dark it was getting. Night comes quickly in the valley. One minute the sky's all pink and coral and flame with the mountains black against it, and the next minute everything's the same charcoal gray. I snapped on the headlight; it gave out a dim sick glow.

"Aw, for Pete's sake!" I yelped. It stood to reason if the tires were soft, the headlight battery was about dead, too.

Dawgonnit, everything was against me, every blamed thing. Squashy tires, dead battery, growling stomach. It felt like a giant traffic cop was standing in the middle of the road, blowing his whistle, holding up a white-gloved hand to me and yelling,

"*Stop!*" But I wasn't going to be stopped. I mean, it was a matter of honor now.

A car came up fast behind me; it swerved at the last minute, and the driver honked and yelled, "Where's your light? You wanna get killed?" I started looking quick for a side road where there wasn't so much traffic.

Soon as I found one, my mind zoomed right back to my stomach. Thinking about Dad and ol' Janet sitting there at the kitchen table, putting away pancakes and hot cheese-franks, about made me drool.

About now, Janet might ask, "Where's Robbie?" (I was pretty sure it'd be her, not Dad, who first missed me.)

And Dad'd yell, "Hey, Robbie, grub's on!" When I didn't answer, he'd probably scowl and grumble, "What's he sore about now?" and stomp upstairs to my room. Then he'd come back down, kind of puzzled, and say, "Where'd he go? Outside?"

They'd open the door and yell, "Robbie! Robbeeee!" and circle the yard and look in the garage...

Who'd notice the bike was gone? Janet, I bet. Ol' bright-eyes. She'd say, "That's funny, he took his bike. I thought Robbie never rode a bike. I thought bike riding made him wheeze."

That's the minute I was waiting for. That's when Dad'd begin to worry. And it wouldn't do him any good now to come up with a smart crack like, "Why didn't he take a taxi?"

I played the scene over and over in my mind while I chugged on down the road, pumping those soggy tires around—and around—and around. My

legs were turning into jelly; my heart pounded so loud in my ears I didn't hear the car coming behind me till its lights flooded the road. This time I didn't take a chance on its swerving; I hit the ditch and went sprawling. The car passed, blaring its horn like it was mad it missed me.

I crawled out from under the bike and heaved it back on the road. Now I had bruises and bumps added to aches and tiredness; I could almost have bawled. I just walked the dumb bike till I got to another crossroad—and then another, just a lane, not even blacktop—before I tried pedaling again.

It was even harder riding on the gravel. I had to stand up and pump with all the muscle left in my jelly legs and all the air I could gulp into my hurting chest. I wondered what time it was. I wondered where I was. Most of all, I wondered what I was going to do.

"I s'pose they're worried enough by now," I told myself. "I s'pose I could as well go home."

Only I wasn't sure where home was. How many turns had I made? Right or left—or both? There weren't any road signs on this little lane. Tall trees were all around me, making a black pocket and shutting out lights I might've got a bearing from. I guessed I'd have to push on to the next crossroad —maybe further—to reach a main road where there'd be signs that said what direction Apple Valley was, and how many miles.

How many miles? When right now I didn't think I could go another yard?

For a minute I panicked. My throat got tight, my

breath whistled, and my heart took off like a scared colt. I got off the bike and stood still, trying to quiet it down before it galloped right out of my chest.

The night was creepy dark. An owl hooted. Birds stirred and made small sleepy sounds. Crickets chirped in a rusty chorus. All of a sudden, right near me in the deep dewy grass, a frog let out a "Ri-vet! Ri-vet!"

I started quickly down the lane, pushing the bike, almost running with it, sniffling a little. Right now it wasn't important how worried Dad was. All that mattered was getting out of this lost, lonesome place . . . before the sniffles turned into a wheeze and the wheeze choked off my wind, and there wouldn't be a blamed thing I could do but lie down on this damp dark road and fight for breath.

It'd been a long time since I'd had a real bad asthma attack, but I hadn't forgotten how it was: the cloudy air in my room smelling funny from the oil Mrs. Wexler dropped into the steam kettle; the doctor coming, even in the middle of the night, to listen to the noises in my chest and decide if I should have a shot of adrenaline or even go to the hospital. . . .

I could remember the hospital, too. That sharp nose-tickling smell, like medicine; the rustle and chink of bottles when a nurse came in; the breathing machine they wheeled up to the bed, half a dozen times a day, and how it hurt my chest to blow into it.

After one of those hospital trips, a special doctor ran tests to find out what triggered my asthma attacks, and the careful life began. And I mean care-

ful. Dull and careful. Safe and careful. Careful and healthy.

"When asthma starts in infancy, like Robbie's," the doctor told Grandma, "there's a good chance he'll outgrow it."

In the meantime, just be careful.

Well, I was fed up with being careful! Just fed to the ears with telling people I couldn't do this or that, and having them look at me like I was a sissy or something. That's what Dad thought I was—yes, he did. Wouldn't ride the bike he'd bought, wouldn't sleep out on the porch he'd built, wouldn't hike in the hills with him.

I sniffled louder. Darn ol' wheeze! Asthma wasn't fair; breathing ought to be something a kid just did naturally, without having to think about *what* he breathed.

Dad'd never seen how sick I could get. He'd sure be scared; he wouldn't know what to do, like Mrs. Wexler and Grandma did. Maybe one bad asthma attack was all it'd take to make him send me back to Iowa, quick as he could put me on the plane.

By the time I came out on a highway, I was just plain blubbering. And the first sign I saw didn't do anything to dry me up.

"Apple Valley," it read. "5 miles."

6

Five miles? When I must've already pumped and plodded seven or eight to get this far? My legs were wobbling so much, my knees knocked together. How could they hold me up for five more miles?

I walked the bike along the shoulder of the road, sniffling back tears, puffing hard for enough breath to keep going. I knew I couldn't make it. My legs wouldn't stand up and my lungs wouldn't hold out. Any minute that strangling wheeze would cut off my air and I'd be done for, right then and there.

Cars whizzed by. Some drivers swerved into the other lane. Some swished by so close, they about blew me into the ditch. Some leaned on their horns till I thought my eardrums would bust. Nobody stopped.

I kept the bike between me and traffic, staying way

out on the edge of the road, so close to the ditch that sometimes my foot slipped and I'd go down on one knee with a grunt, the darn bike on top of me. I must've collected more bruises than a prize fighter.

Every time I got back on the road, I was madder. I was really burned up, and I muttered things under my breath and pushed the bike faster till I was practically jogging.

"Apple Valley. 2 miles."

When I saw that sign, I was so surprised I just stood and stared, my chest heaving, my mouth hanging open. While I'd been huffing and puffing and about ready to die any minute, I'd covered three miles. Three miles!

Lights bore down on me. The car behind me had two wheels on the shoulder of the road. I didn't waste time arguing about right of way; I tumbled into the ditch. The car stopped.

"Robbie?" Dad called. He was out of the car and scrambling down into the ditch before I could boost the bike off of me. "Are you hurt?"

I staggered out from under the bike, so mad I could've popped my buttons, and started hauling the bike back up on the road.

"Here, I'll do that," Dad said.

"I c'n do it myself!" I yelped. And I did, with a staggering heave that about knocked me down again.

Dad asked, "Want a lift?"

I was weaving around on the edge of the road like a drunk, but I said, "I can perfectly well get home by myself."

"I know you can," said Dad. "But as long as we're

both headed the same way, we might as well go together, right?"

"Okay," I said. Dad swung the bike up on the luggage rack while I stumbled into the car. By the time he got behind the wheel, I was slumped far down in the seat, half asleep.

Just dimly, I heard him talking . . . "missed a pretty good supper; that Janet's quite a cook . . . she wanted to go out looking for you, but I sent her home . . . told her I knew you were all right . . . sometimes a guy's just got to get out and walk off something that's bothering him . . . do it myself . . . a girl wouldn't understand . . ."

I wanted to yell at him, "I was not all right! I could've had an asthma attack and about died! A fat lot *you'd* have cared, sitting there, gobbling pancakes, telling ol' Janet a'course I was all right . . ."

But I was too tired . . . too tired . . . the engine hum and the motion and the lights whizzing by were getting to me . . . sleep was a steeper ditch than any I'd tumbled into tonight, and I was falling into it . . . deeper . . . deeper . . .

The next thing I knew, I was lying in my own bed, with sunlight streaming through the windows, and it was Sunday morning. Anyway, I guessed it was Sunday morning. As pooped as I'd been, I might've slept a couple of days.

I stretched real cautiously, first one arm, then the other, then my legs. Wow, was I sore and stiff! I didn't think I could ever get out of bed again—but I did, creaking and groaning like an old, old man.

I limped over to the window, my feet as tender

as if I'd been tramping on hot coals. After last night's blackness, that sunshine looked good enough to eat. I stretched some more and took a big, cautious breath and then a bigger one. My ribs felt like they'd been hammered, and my arms were turning purple with big fat bruises, but—funny, I didn't feel all that bad. In fact, I felt kind of good. Like I could beat my chest and yodel like Tarzan.

Then I heard Dad rattling pans and silverware in the kitchen, and I wanted to get back into bed and stay under the covers till Monday morning. I'd been too sleepy last night to be sure how he felt about my running off. Maybe he was plenty mad and worried, and just cooled it because what's the good of scolding someone who's out on his feet? Now I guessed I'd have to face the music. I was sure too hungry to put it off much longer.

So I dressed and clomped downstairs, limping a little more than I really had to, ready for anything.

Dad was at the stove, testing the griddle with a drop of water. All he said was, "Well, you're awake, are you? How about pancakes and sausages?"

And he began whistling, kind of under his breath, as if he didn't have a thing on his mind but pouring batter on the griddle in identical sizzling circles.

I'd been braced for getting jumped on and yelled at and maybe doing some yelling of my own. Now I went flatter than a balloon with a pin stuck in it. All the words dammed up in me leaked out like stale air.

Dad hadn't finished setting the table, and I certainly wasn't going to ask him for what was missing.

So I poured my own glass of milk and set out syrup and butter. The pancakes smelled like heaven, but when Dad slid the first stack onto my plate, I made myself sit down slow and take a small sip of milk before I paid any attention to them. Then I quick folded a pancake over a sausage and wolfed it down in two bites.

Dad didn't notice. He was concentrating on pouring out six more circles exactly the same size. Whistling softly, not saying anything.

My plate was empty by the time the second stack was ready. He didn't ask if I wanted more, just put them in front of me and poured more batter and went on whistling. I went through three stacks and two glasses of milk before I even slowed down. Then I sat back and sort of sighed.

Dad served himself a stack and poured a cup of coffee. He asked, "You want to watch the next batch? Turn 'em when they bubble around the edges."

I'd never flipped a pancake before. I'd never done *anything* at a stove except stir something when Grandma asked me to. Now I hung over the griddle, biting my tongue while I watched those edges, nervous as a cat. When I stuck the thingamajig under one circle, I was sure the pancake'd splatter on the stove or maybe the floor . . .

And hey, it went over neat as a jigsaw piece falling into place—and a whole lot prettier, not too pale, not too brown! Only trouble was, I was so busy admiring it, I almost forgot the others; then I slapped 'em over too fast and they splashed each other. But I put the pretty one on top when I scooped 'em.

onto Dad's plate, and all he said was, "Mighty good," and tucked 'em away.

So okay. So he'd let me sleep and eat before he said anything. Now it'd come, all the words and feelings he'd been holding back about last night. I kind of braced myself, while we cleared the table and rinsed and stacked the dishes, waiting for the dam to bust.

Then he said, "How about if we take your bike down and get some air in those tires?"

Well, I stood there with my mouth hanging open and no words coming out. How could I say, "I won't ride it," when I *had* ridden it? And what was the use of telling him, "Bike riding makes me wheeze," when last night it hadn't? (I still didn't know why. Maybe because the ground was damp, not dusty.)

"Okay?" he asked.

"If you want to, okay," I said. Making sure he understood it was his idea, not mine.

Ol' Janet busted out of her house soon as we came out the door. She must've camped at her window half the morning.

"Hi, Robbie!" she sang out.

"Hi," I said, tromping around the car and climbing in.

"Robbie, you're limping! *Why* are you limping? Did you get hurt, Robbie? Where'd you go last night?" Every question brought her a few yards closer till she was right there in the driveway.

I was all for just closing the door and getting on with our business, but Dad, of course, had to explain

what we were going to do. "Want to go along, Janet?"

She looked real disappointed. "I can't. We're going pretty soon to Grandma's. She wants to hear all about Outward Bound and what Junie'll be doing. He's leaving tomorrow, you know."

"Hey, that's right. Well, see you later, Janet."

And we were off, leaving her still bubbling with questions on the curb.

Dad took his camera along—he always does—and after we got the tires pumped up and bought a new headlight battery, he said, "Want to take a drive? Spotted a robin's nest yesterday; fledglings are getting pretty big. Sure make a great picture, if I could get one just taking off."

I said, "I don't care." And I didn't. I'd watched plenty of nests with Grandpa, the two of us sitting so quiet we almost didn't breathe, while a baby bird teetered on the edge of the nest and then got its nerve up for that first big bold flight. I mean, I didn't have to see things through a view finder to know they were there.

We drove out into the country a couple of miles, then Dad pulled off the road and said, "Have to hike from here. Want to come along?"

My feet felt like two king-size blisters. I said, "I'll wait," and slumped down in the seat.

Dad hesitated a bit, then said, "Be right back."

And he was. I couldn't figure him out. If he really wanted that picture, he sure didn't wait long to get it. He said, "I settled for Papa Robin handing out a worm. Poor guy looks pretty beat."

"Prob'ly is," I said. "He has to scrounge up fresh meat six or seven times an hour."

"That often?" Dad sounded really surprised. "Hey, I didn't know that."

I didn't believe him. I mean, everybody knows that. What was he trying to do, make conversation? Like you do with visitors that you don't know very well?

I slumped still lower in the seat. This morning when I got up, I'd been a little scared to face what was coming, then flattened when nothing did. But I'd still been waiting for it.

Now I quit waiting. Dad wasn't going to say anything about last night. He wasn't going to scold and yell at me and tell me if I ever pulled a stunt like that again, he'd tan me good. You don't say things like that to a stranger—

Only to someone you care about a lot.

7

Soon as we got home, Dad loped into the darkroom to develop the pictures he'd taken over the weekend. I puttered around upstairs, wishing ol' Janet hadn't gone to her grandma's. I mean, you could be good and sure *she'd* have wanted to know all about last night, where I'd gone and what had happened. It would make quite a story while it was still fresh. Tomorrow it would be old news.

And anyway, tomorrow she'd be doing all the talking again—about Junie taking off for Outward Bound. Boy, the way everybody acted, you'd think he was spinning off to Oz on a cyclone cloud!

I poked around in a box of stuff I'd never unpacked because I hadn't needed it yet. Bowling shoes: I hadn't bowled a line since I got here. Scout uniform. Chess set . . .

All of a sudden, I was homesick again. Grandpa had taught me how to play chess and given me the set. He took a chess magazine that showed games that champions had played, every move they made. When Grandpa wasn't there to play me, I'd set the pieces up and follow one of those championship games—you know, first guessing the move I'd have made, then looking to see what the champ had done. Grandpa said you could learn a lot that way.

Grandpa had packed some copies of *Chess Review* with my set. Just looking through them gave me a hankering to play again, so I took all the stuff downstairs—magazines, chess set, board—and set up the pieces.

I was about halfway through a game that Bobby Fischer had played against the Russian champion when Dad came to the door of the darkroom. He looked real pleased with himself.

"Want to see the picture I got of Papa Robin?" he asked.

"Yeh," I said, frowning over Bobby Fischer's last move, a real smart one that I wouldn't have thought of in a million years.

"Well, come on in, then. It's drying on the line."

I left the chessboard slowly, wondering what the Russian guy would do now. The darkroom was a spooky place with its red light and its trays of developing stuff—kind of like a mad scientist's lab in those horror movies. There was a clothesline strung across the room with wet prints pinned to it.

And that's where the room quit looking like a mad scientist's lab, because the prints weren't grisly

pictures of victims or monsters, but happy things like you might find on kindergarten walls:

A kid climbing over the concrete whale in the park, and another one glued to the fence watching ducks in the pond . . .

A real little kid playing with his puppy, and farther down the clothesline, the same kid and pup napping together (Dad must've hung around the park quite a while waiting for that one) . . .

And there was the robin, all right, looking scrawny and tired, like Dad said, perched on the edge of the nest with a worm in his bill and all those wide-open beaks waiting for it.

"Dedicated to fathers all over the world," said Dad, half-joking, half-serious. "Like it?"

"Yeh, sure," I said. And then, because he seemed to be waiting for me to say more, I told him, "Grandpa and I used to watch nests all the time."

Dad said, "Yes. I suppose so," his voice sort of flat, like he was let down about something. We went back to the living room and he perked right up again when he noticed the chess set. "Hey, I didn't know you played chess!"

"Do you?" I asked, surprised.

"Used to. When I was a kid. Want to play a game?"

"Sure." I could finish the Fischer-Russian game later. A live game was more fun.

Only this one didn't turn out to be. I had the white pieces, so I made the first move—pawn to king four (that's the way the Ruy Lopez opening starts; Grandpa says the Ruy Lopez is the safest and

oldest opening). I expected Dad to answer with pawn to king four, too. Instead, he moved out his rook's pawn! I couldn't remember *any* opening that did that.

I decided to stay with the Ruy Lopez a little longer, so I brought out my king's knight. And he moved out his other rook's pawn. I wondered if he knew something I didn't know; was he setting a trap for me? I studied the board real carefully before each move.

He didn't. When it was his turn, he just grabbed a piece and put it down somewhere, whistling softly and looking kind of happy about it all . . . until all of a sudden, in just sixteen moves, I checkmated him.

That stopped the whistling for a minute. He shook his head and said, "Wow, that was fast! How about another?"

"Okay," I said. I figured he might have been laying back, waiting to see whether I could really play chess or just move the pieces. We set up the board again, and this time Dad had white. He moved out his queen-bishop's pawn.

Well, the English opening begins that way, so I answered by bringing out my king's knight. And he brought out his queen's knight, and I moved out my king's pawn, and he did the same. Then I moved my queen's pawn one space forward, thinking we really had a game going this time.

Then, of all dumb things, he moved his queen out to bishop four, right smack into a space where I could take it with either bishop or knight!

Well, I tried to be polite about it. Though Grandpa and I don't take back moves after we've made them, I asked him, "You sure that's what you want to do?"

"Of course," said Dad, not even giving the board a second glance.

So I took his queen, and after that the game was one disaster after another till I checkmated him again.

Dad admitted, "Guess I've forgotten more about chess than I knew—and that was never very much."

I was pretty bored, but still being polite. I asked him, "How about if I give you a handicap? A rook maybe? Or a bishop and a knight?"

"That sounds like a lot of handicap," Dad said. But he took it. And I beat him anyway. So the next game, I gave him a queen; to play without your queen is about the biggest handicap you can give an opponent.

Dad wasn't whistling now. And he studied the board hard before every move. But he still lost. After that game, he pushed away the board. "Guess I don't measure up to your grandfather when it comes to chess, do I?"

I said, "Grandpa's awfully smart. You have to be when you run a bank."

"Yes," Dad said, sort of quick. "Well, at least I can take a good picture."

"Oh, sure," I said, and then, just making conversation, I added, "Chess takes a lot of strategy."

"And picture taking's easy, is that it?" Dad asked, getting kind of red. "Just snapping a shutter, right?"

Well, he'd said it, not me. And I didn't see why he was getting sore. Anybody knows chess is real complicated; comparing it to picture taking was like comparing bees and butter; they weren't the same thing at all.

But he was sore, all right. He got up so quick, he about knocked the board off the table. "It may come as a surprise to you," he said stiffly, "to know that snapping a shutter takes brains, too."

And he stalked off into the darkroom and shut the door.

8

Well, there was a kind of frost over the house the rest of the day, both of us acting a little too polite and careful of what we said. Dad made hot tuna-burgers for supper, real fancy ones with cream of celery soup and hard-boiled eggs and sliced tomatoes, almost like he was showing off what a good cook he could be when he really tried. And I washed the dishes without being asked, and afterwards we read a bit; then I yawned like I could hardly keep awake.

"Guess I'll turn in early," I said, and got out of there. Boy, was I glad that day was over!

Monday morning, things were back to normal. Dad went off to the photographer's studio where he works, so I drifted across the street to watch the excitement at the Kernan house. The whole family

was there to see Junie off, and the house fairly rocked with sound.

Mrs. Kernan had a list of what Junie was supposed to take; in the midst of the uproar she was checking off items like a general getting troops ready for battle.

"Heavy socks," she stopped at that item. "They were the last thing I washed last night. Timothy, please get your brother's socks from the drying rack. Warm sweaters, hiking boots; you'll need tennis shoes, too."

"Got 'em," said Junie. "Got everything."

He looked real pleased and excited and anxious to be off. Ol' Janet was doing kangaroo hops around him. "Did you remember your notebook?" she asked.

"Yep," he said.

"And *two* ball-points, in case one runs dry. You're sure?"

"Yep," he told her.

"Because if you don't write everything down right away, you might forget."

"Not likely," Junie grinned. In the noisy Kernan family, he was the silent one, big, tall, kind of skinny, quiet like an island in the middle of a sunny lake.

Mrs. Kernan ticked off the last item on her list. "All right," she said, and gave Junie a quick kiss. "You're going to have a tremendous experience. Live every moment of it."

"You bet," said Junie. It seemed like a funny goodbye. If it'd been me going off, Grandma would

have said, "Now, be careful," and Grandpa would have said, "Have a good time." Nobody would have said: *Live every moment of it.*

I was still saying the words over to myself when Mr. Kernan and Junie roared out of the driveway, bound for the bus station where a chartered bus would take the guys to their base camp.

Janet and Timmy and Mike waved as long as the car was in sight. They'd have liked to go along, you can bet, but Mrs. Kernan said home was the place to say goodbye. She went firmly into the house to begin whatever the day's work was, and Janet bounced just as promptly back to her own plans.

"When *I'm* old enough, I'm going to an Outward Bound school, too," she declared.

"Aw, it's just for boys," I said, trying to put her down.

"Girls, too," she said. "I read all about it in the folders and things they sent Junie. Do you want to read about it, too? Do you want to pick out which camp *you'll* go to when you're sixteen?"

"Hah, sixteen! Guess I got plenty of time to think about that!"

"Well, Junie's been planning it since almost forever. And saving for it. It costs a lot, more'n four hundred dollars, and it takes a long time to save that much. I'm going to start saving right now. I'm going to save half of everything I earn. What d'you do with what *you* earn, Robbie?"

"Earn from what?"

"Oh, all kinds of things. Paper route and mowing lawns and baby-sitting and picking beans and . . ."

She frowned at me, like you'd frown at an odd type of bug you hadn't come across before. "Don't you have any jobs?"

I sure wasn't going to remind her that most of the jobs on her list would've made me wheeze. "I get an allowance," I said.

"Well, so do I. But it isn't big enough for me to save much." She added politely, "Maybe yours is."

It wasn't, but I wasn't going to tell her that, either. So I said, "Grandpa gives me a bond every year for my birthday. 'Course, I'm supposed to save those for college."

Mention of birthdays got her mind off money. "Your birthday's real soon now, isn't it, Robbie?"

"Yep. End of the week."

"What're you going to do? Are you going to have a party, Robbie? Is your Dad taking you someplace special? I know where I want to go on *my* birthday. I want to go to the zoo and the museum . . ."

"Aw, I bet you've been there lots already."

"Not with you. But if you come to my birthday party, we can go together and you can explain everything I want to know."

"Oh, wow!" I could imagine what *that'd* be like! There wasn't anybody in the world could ask more questions than ol' Janet.

"You will come, won't you, Robbie?"

"Well . . . it's a long time yet."

"September sixteenth. That's not *very* long."

"I'll think about it," I promised. My stomach told

me it was getting past lunch time. I said, "I gotta go home now."

"Wait, Robbie! Wait'll I get the Outward Bound things." She ran into the house, and I sat down on the steps.

Mrs. Moffett came wobbling up the street on her bicycle and managed the turn into our driveway without quite tipping over. Mrs. Moffett thought there were too many cars on the road already and said she wasn't about to add to the air pollution by driving one. But she wasn't what you'd think of as the bike-riding type. You could draw Mrs. Moffett in circles, one circle on top of another like a snowman. The very top circle was short, fuzzy gray hair that stood out around her head like a halo.

"Young man," she called to me, "have you had any lunch?"

"No, ma'am. Anyway, not yet."

"That's just what I thought. I'll fix you a little something before I start cleaning."

Janet came back in time to hear that. She called, "Hi, Mrs. Moffett! What're you making for lunch?"

Boy, what a pushy kid! She didn't hint for an invitation; she practically asked for it.

Mrs. Moffett parked her bicycle carefully by the garage door. She said, "High protein today. If I know Mr. Foskett, the boy's had nothing but carbohydrates all weekend. I'll make sure he gets high protein and plenty of calcium and something for quick energy."

"It sounds delicious," Janet said, kind of doubtfully.

"You're welcome to share it," Mrs. Moffett said, and trotted into the house.

"Hah!" I gave ol' Janet a shove to get her started, and we ran across the street. "Serve you right if she gives you a vitamin pill!"

Only of course lunch wasn't a vitamin pill. It was real good, like most all of Mrs. Moffett's meals are. Hamburger patties and hard-boiled eggs and carrot sticks and celery and radishes. And rye bread and tall glasses of milk and ice cream with strawberries on it. Oh, boy, I ate till I could hardly move!

So did Janet. She hardly said two words till the last lick of ice cream was gone, and anything that could shut *her* up had to be good.

Afterwards, we took Junie's Outward Bound folders out in the yard and leafed through them. "Doesn't it look terrific?" Janet sighed.

"Gosh!" I don't know that I'd have said terrific. Terrifying was more like it. "Y'mean Junie's gonna do all that stuff?"

"He'll absolutely love it," said Janet. She had to be a nut to sound so blissful, and Junie was another. "Robbie, I can't wait till I'm sixteen—can you?"

Huh, I could wait a whole lot longer than that. Climbing mountains and swimming in ice-cold streams and trekking through the wilderness and going on a solo hike—solo, mind you!—and staying out all night. Wow, who did Junie think he was, Superman?

"Why can't we do it pretend?" Janet said. "You know, like pretending Black Butte's a mountain. And breaking our own trail to the top. And cooking

meals over a campfire. And making a shelter and not coming back till morning."

She was getting nuttier by the minute. I said, "Whatcha want to do, get lost? So they'll have to send out a search-and-rescue team, and you'll get written about in the newspaper?"

"Of course not, Robbie! That's the whole idea: learning *not* to get lost. Or how to take care of yourself if you do get lost. That's very important, you know."

"Your Mom won't let you." It was the quickest answer I could come up with to squash this newest, wackiest idea. And it worked. She sighed some more, not blissfully this time.

"No, I guess not," she said. "Mom'd say we have to learn first how to take care of ourselves. And how can we learn if we don't do it?"

Well, that was a problem for her to chomp on and worry and try to crack open. I figured it'd take her six or seven years to come up with an answer, so I could safely forget *that* screwy notion.

Boy, was I wrong!

9

Mike came roaring up the street. For a little guy, he could make an awful lot of noise.

"Mom! Timmy! Janet!" he bawled.

Janet went out to the parking to meet him. "What's the matter?"

"Puppy!" he yelled. "Hurt bad!" Tears were dripping off his chin.

"Okay," Janet said. "It'll be all right. We'll take care of him."

Mike turned and trotted back in the direction he'd come from, with ol' Janet steaming right on his heels. "Hey," I called, "don't you first want to tell your Mom? Or maybe Mrs. Moffett . . ." They didn't pay any attention, so I loped after them.

Mike roared back over his shoulder. "Hurt bad! I didn't touch him, Janet."

"That's right," said Janet. "You're a good boy, Mike."

Mike seemed to feel better after that. He quit bawling and put all his lung power into running. The puppy was maybe six or eight blocks from our house, except there aren't any real blocks out in the suburbs, just a main road with little roads curving off it every now and then. It was a puzzle to me how Mike could wander so far from home and find his way back again. He must've been part carrier-pigeon.

The puppy had been hit by a car. We could see it ahead of us, a little hump on the side of the road. Now it was ol' Janet who began to cry.

"I'll bet the driver didn't stop," she sniffled. "I'll bet he didn't even look back!"

"He probably figured it was dead," I said, not feeling very comfortable myself.

"He should've stopped to make sure," Janet wept, running faster. She was as mad as she was sad now. Her cheeks were so red hot, her tears dried as fast as they fell. "And even if it was dead, he could've laid it on the grass and asked around to find out whose it was."

"Yeh, sure," I said.

Then we were kneeling by the puppy, and Janet's tears stopped—just like that—and she was all quiet and soothing. "There, there," she said over and over again, stroking the puppy's fuzzy head. "It's all right. Everything's going to be all right."

She sounded mighty sure of herself, but when she

looked up at me, her eyes were big and scared. "How bad is he hurt, Robbie?" she asked.

Well, how was I to know? I touched him all over, real gentle. Grandpa and I had sometimes come across a hurt bird or animal; I could remember how he checked for what was broken or if it was hurt inside and maybe couldn't live. The puppy wasn't bleeding from his mouth or nose, so I figured his insides were all right. And though he couldn't get onto his feet, he flapped his tail once when we talked to him. I didn't think he could do that if his back was broken.

"A broken hip maybe," I guessed. "Or maybe only busted legs and a lot of shock. Shock can kill a thing even when it's not hurt bad."

Janet took my word for it as trustingly as if I'd been a doctor. "If something's broken, we have to be real careful about moving him, don't we? Mike, look around for something flat to put him on. Where d'you suppose he came from, Robbie? No collar, and such a long way from a house."

"Maybe somebody dumped him," I said. "Some folks do that when they don't want an animal."

Her cheeks flamed again. "People are mean!"

"Well, maybe they hope he'll find a home."

"They should find it themselves! Or take him to the Humane Society. Or not let him get born in the first place!"

Wow, ol' Janet ought to have been a girl knight, if there was such a thing! I could practically see her leading a crusade. With banners. I went to help Mike look for a shingle or something, but we didn't

find anything that would do. So I took off my shirt and we eased it under the puppy so carefully it hardly whimpered. Then Janet picked up two corners, and I took the other two, and we carried the puppy between us, gently as in a sling, stepping as softly as if the road was paved with eggs. Mike ran ahead of us to spread the news.

"We ought to get him to a vet right away," I said, thinking out loud. "If we have to wait till Dad gets home—or your Dad—"

"We'll take him on our bikes. Your bike's got a big basket," said Janet.

I wondered how many miles it was to a vet's. I was still lame from Saturday night's marathon, but at least the bike tires had air in them now. Even if they hadn't, though—even if they were so flat they rolled off the rims—I bet ol' Janet would've expected me to pedal clear across town. Crusaders are like that.

Just as we came in sight of home, Timmy came busting out of the Kernan house to meet us, with Mrs. Kernan not far behind. She gave the puppy and the sling and the whole set-up a quick look that didn't miss a thing.

"Good, very good," she said. "Robert, Janet, you've handled it very well."

I swelled a little; if we weren't knights already, that statement was the tap on our shoulders that did the job. "If you can tell us where the nearest vet is," I said, taking charge of the crusade, "we figured we could ride the puppy there in my bicycle basket, and not bump him one bit."

"I'm sure you could," Mrs. Kernan said. "But a car would get him there more quickly—if I can locate one. Wouldn't that be better? . . ." She was waiting for my answer, as if my opinion was really important. Boy, next time she asked me to go to the store for her, I was going!

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

She went into the house and made a couple of phone calls. In no time at all, a neighbor drove up. We all piled into the car, Mrs. Kernan in front. Timmy and Mike scrunched down on the floor in back so Janet and me and the puppy could have the whole back seat. We still held the puppy in his sling, so the movement just rocked him gently. Ol' Janet talked to him all the way, telling him what a good dog he was and how everything was going to be all right. Either that or the rocking kept him real quiet, though he must have hurt a lot, poor little guy.

"Y'oughta be a doctor," I told her.

She said, "*You* ought to be a doctor. You knew just what to do."

I grew two inches. Right then and there, I could've licked anything twice my size. What I couldn't lick was so small I couldn't even see it.

Dog hair.

10

Soon as the car door had closed on us, I'd felt the tickle. We were holding the sling above our laps, the puppy almost under our noses. There had to be soft puppy fuzz floating in the air.

I tried holding my breath. I tried turning my head halfway 'round my neck. "Whyn't we roll down the windows?" I asked. "Awful hot in here."

Ol' Janet said worriedly, "Won't that make a draft? We should keep the puppy warm, shouldn't we?"

Yeh, I knew that. Especially if he was suffering from shock. So I didn't say any more about the windows, just held my breath till my eyes almost popped out, then let it out slow and took in the littlest whiff I could get by with.

Tim was practically sitting on my feet. He stared

up at me like I was a Fourth of July fireworks display. He said, "Why is your face so red? Are you gonna be sick?"

"Oh, no!" Janet cried. "Don't be sick, Robbie. You'll jar the puppy!"

Well, that was the limit! I snorted, "I am not going to be sick!"—which was a mistake, because I took in a big gulp of air mixed with puppy hair. Now I could feel the tickle way down into my chest. It scared me. Even with no shirt on, I began to sweat. My chest got tight. I coughed and choked and gasped for air, and then couldn't breathe it out.

I held the sling with one hand, and with the other rolled down a window fast and stuck my head out.

"What are you *doing*?" Janet yelled. But I just leaned my head on the window frame till we stopped in front of the Animal Hospital.

Mrs. Kernan asked, "Robert, are you all right?"

I lifted my head and took a couple of cautious breaths. "Yeh, I'm fine," I said. "I think."

The scary feeling of being about to suffocate lifted off me like a big black cloud. I eased out of the car, still holding tight to my end of the sling, and ol' Janet and me carried the puppy into the waiting room. The girl at the desk waved us right on to the next room where there was an examining table. We laid the puppy down so gently he never knew when we let go of the sling, and the vet took over.

"Wow," I said. I went back out to stand in the doorway. The tight feeling was going out of my chest. Just breathing seemed the most wonderful sensation in the world.

The vet came out a little later with my shirt. "He's lucky," he said. "Got out of it with just a broken leg. His rear end's bruised and cut up, but nothing else is broken. You handled him very well. In a few days, he'll be getting around on a splint and cast as well as if he had four good legs."

"We'll phone every day to check on him," Mrs. Kernan promised. "In the meantime," she told us kids, "we'll try to locate the owner."

"If he has one," Janet said. I knew she was still feeling mad and sad about his maybe having been dumped.

At their neighbor's house, the Kernans stopped to visit awhile, and I went on home, buttoning on my shirt as I ran, forgetting that I'd have to change it for a fresh one anyway. I was pretty excited about all that had happened; I wanted to tell someone about it.

"Mrs. Moffett!" I yelled.

She didn't answer. I went back outside. Her bicycle was still in the driveway, so she hadn't gone home yet. I poked around the yard, then wandered out to look up and down the street.

There she came! Puffing like a little round switch engine, almost too out of breath to speak her mind. But not quite.

"Robbie, where have you been? I looked all over —I called and called—*Robbie, what happened to you!*" Her face was all puckered up; she looked shaken and scared. I remembered I was still wearing that dirty shirt with the puppy's bloodstains on it.

"I'm okay, Mrs. Moffett. It wasn't me got hurt.

It was a puppy. And we took it to the vet, me and Janet and Mrs. Kernan . . ."

She wasn't listening. I guess she hadn't heard anything past the first two words. She just hugged me right there on the street. "Oh, Robbie, if you knew how worried I've been!"

She sounded just like Grandma. She acted just like Grandma. I leaned against her and let all the worried words flow over me like a warm bath.

"I almost had an asthma attack," I said. Funny, I hadn't remembered it till then. "The dog hair made me wheeze and I couldn't get my breath. It was pretty scary for a minute."

"Of course it was. Poor boy, let's get you right into the house. Haven't you got some medicine to take for that wheeze?"

I said, "I'm not wheezing any more. It stopped, soon as I got out of the car." But I didn't shake off her plump comforting arm or protest about going inside . . . or lying down for a while, and drinking some hot peppermint tea she fixed, because she thought peppermint tea cured 'most everything.

After all, I'd worried her plenty, and if it made her feel better to fuss over me, why, that was all right. It had been a long time since anybody fussed over me. And I had to admit . . .

It made me feel pretty good, too.

11

Next day, Janet and me and Timmy and Mike went back to the neighborhood where we'd found the puppy and asked at every house about him. Nobody was missing a puppy. Looked like he really had fallen out of a car—or been pushed. I was keeping my fingers crossed, hoping hard that we'd find his owner, so we could forget that possibility and ol' Janet would quit looking so stern and sort of—sort of bleak. The thought of anybody treating an animal that way really made her feel bad.

" 'Course we could advertise," I said. We must've walked miles by that time, covering more ground than the puppy ever could have; there wasn't a door left to knock on. "We could put an ad in 'Lost and Found.' "

"Does it cost a lot?" Janet asked. "I've got thirty-five cents."

Timmy said, "I've got some, too. I've got maybe a quarter." And Mike shouted, "I'll empty my piggy bank! There's a lot of rattle in my piggy bank!"

I hated to disappoint them, but I knew that even with my fifty cents we were probably way short. "Tell you what," I suggested, "let's tack a notice on the bulletin board in that little grocery store. You know, the one on Walnut."

"Oh, yes!" Janet cried, her spirits bouncing up again. "I bet everybody around here goes to that store sometimes; it's the only one open all day and night!" Her feet began bouncing, too, doing kangaroo hops toward home. "We'll make a notice they can't miss—"

"Hey, I don't think you can take up the whole board—"

"Not big," she said, "Just something that'll make people stop and look. Like a picture."

I thought of the pictures on Dad's drying line, like the puppy and little kid in the park. People'd stop to look at that, all right. But the puppy didn't look at all like ours, and anyway the picture had probably disappeared by now to wherever Dad's pictures went—a contest, maybe?

Anyway, Janet was thinking of a different kind of picture. "I'll draw one," she said. "Or I'll cut one out of a magazine. And you can print what we want to say. You print just beautifully, Robbie."

So that's what we did. She drew the puppy—and it really looked like him, kind of. Anyway, you

could tell it was a shepherd type and pretty young. And I printed in big clear letters that you couldn't miss, "Did you lose this puppy?" And, in smaller print, where to call for information about him.

We were all pretty happy about it when it was finished. We took it to the store right away and tacked it smack in the center of the board (moving a few other notices to clear the space). "There, nobody can miss that," I said. "If anybody around here lost a puppy, we'll hear about it quick."

Ol' Janet would hardly stir out of her house the rest of the day, for fear she'd miss a phone call or a ring at the doorbell (we'd used the Kernan address because it was more likely there'd be somebody there than at my house).

I stuck around pretty close, too. Timmy pitched balls for me to catch. His throw was wild as a young bunny, but it was good practice. The Early Bird pitchers weren't all that accurate, either. But after a while his arm gave out, and I had all the knuckle bruises I could use for one day.

And still no call had come. Ol' Janet began to droop again. I tried quick to think of something to perk her up. "We could call the vet," I said.

"Mama already did,' she said. "The puppy's doing just fine."

"I don't mean just that vet," I told her. "I mean all of 'em in the yellow pages. When people lose a pet, they call vets to find if it maybe got taken there. The Humane Society, too."

"That's *right!*" she cried. And for the rest of the

afternoon, the Kernan phone was so busy nobody could have called in if they wanted to.

But that didn't get us anywhere, either. I was clear out of ideas. "Maybe tomorrow," I said, as hopefully as I could. "Everybody doesn't go to the store every day, you know. Dad only goes once a week, unless we run out of something. You just wait, *somebody's* looking for that pup." Or anyway, I hoped so. I certainly hoped so.

While we ate supper, I brought Dad up to date on what we'd done. He said, "What happens if you can't find the owner?"

"I dunno," I admitted.

He asked, "Who pays the vet?"

I gaped at him, a forkful of food halfway to my mouth. "Huh?"

"He doesn't work for nothing, you know."

"But we didn't—we just *found* the puppy—we saved his life!"

"Sure you did. And when you save a life, you become responsible for it. Ethically, that is."

"Aw . . ." I didn't know what he meant by "ethical," but the whole thing sounded screwy to me. Like giving a lifesaver a penalty instead of a medal.

" 'S the truth," said Dad, and went off to his darkroom, whistling as carelessly as if he hadn't just knocked the props out from under me.

12

First thing next morning, I nipped across the street to tell ol' Janet the bad news. She wasn't as surprised as I'd expected.

"That's kind of what I figured," she said soberly. "If you save something, you ought to take care of it. Because if you *aren't* going to take care of it, what's the use of saving it in the first place?"

"Huh! You think you're a lawyer or something?" But I was shaken. What Janet said made sense. "D'you suppose we ought to ask the vet what he's gonna charge?"

"Okay. Then we'll know how much we have to save."

"Save! Ho, I bet he wants his money sooner than a hundred years from now!" I was getting worried. "Maybe we ought to talk to your mother."

"She isn't home. She's at a meeting. But I know what she'd say. She'd say we should just sit down and think this through calmly and sensibly." For a couple of seconds there, ol' Janet sounded exactly like Mrs. Kernan. I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd called me Robert! Janet finished up, "Mama says panic doesn't solve anything. There's got to be an answer if you look for it."

I said hopefully, "Maybe your Mom figured to take care of the bill . . ." My voice died away even before Janet said,

"It's our problem, isn't it? We could've left the puppy there and hoped somebody else would pick it up."

"Yeh," I admitted, "or we could've run home and asked your Mom or Mrs. Moffett what to do." I could see how asking someone else to give orders shifted the responsibility to their shoulders. But that was a little kid's way out; that's what Mike had done. We hadn't been little kids, me and ol' Janet, when we'd carried the puppy home so carefully and figured how to get him to a vet. We'd been crusaders.

You couldn't be both.

I said doubtfully, "I might get some money for my birthday. Dad always used to send me a check, when I lived with Grandma and Grandpa."

"Oh, fine!" Janet looked a lot happier. "And I can pay you back my half, quick as I earn it. I can earn lots of money in the summer. I can pick beans —have you ever picked beans, Robbie?"

"I don't think they did that back in Iowa," I said, "not where I lived." And anyway, working in the

fields would probably have made me wheeze. But I didn't say that out loud. I was good and sick and tired of telling people what made me wheeze.

"Anyway," I finished real firmly, "the puppy's owner is sure to call pretty soon, and then he'll take care of everything."

"Of course he will," Janet said. "The phone'll ring any minute now."

Only it didn't.

Along about noon, Mrs. Kernan came home. She looked at the two of us sitting on the porch steps, not talking, our faces as long as broomsticks. "No calls?" she asked.

"No calls," we told her.

She sat down on the steps with us. "The veterinarian asked if we were finding a home for the puppy, or if it was to go to the Humane Society. That's something we have to think about."

Janet said sadly, "You don't think the owner's going to call."

I muttered, "Maybe he never wanted it in the first place," and then was sorry I said it. Ol' Janet's face crinkled like she might cry any minute.

But Mrs. Kernan just nodded. "We have to consider that, too. The puppy had no collar; there has been no advertisement for him in the 'Lost and Found' column—yes, he might very well have been abandoned."

Janet burst out, "Well, he isn't abandoned now! *We* want him—*we'll* take care of him, won't we, Robbie?"

"Yeh, sure," I agreed. What's a vet's bill between

friends? What's a few asthma attacks? I had that two-inches-taller feeling again. "We'll take care of that ol' pup!"

Mrs. Moffett wobbled into our driveway, and I went across the street to meet her.

"Here, I'll park that," I said, grabbing the bike before it quite crashed to the ground. I walked it to the garage and pushed the kickstand into position, then held the door open for Mrs. Moffett.

"Why, thank you, Robbie," she said. Her round face looked pink and pleased and sort of flustered, like nobody had held a door for her in a long, long time.

I swaggered after her into the house. "Need any help?" I asked. One thing I was finding out in a hurry: being a crusader isn't a part-time job. If you go that route, you got to go all the way.

13

Ol' Janet turned up after lunch with a couple of scratch pads and pencils. "So we can make a list of jobs to look for," she explained. "I already put baby-sitting on mine."

"You're awful young to baby-sit," I objected.

"Not if I do it at home. 'Cause Mama's there, if I need help. And the back yard's fenced, so a little kid can't run out on the street. And we've got loads of games and toys to play with."

"Yeh." I had to admit she was way ahead of me there. What could *I* do? I scowled at the blank page on my scratch pad.

"You could help me," Janet suggested hopefully. "We could baby-sit more kids if there were two of us."

"Hmmm," I stalled her off that idea. There ought

to be something I could do on my own. I scowled some more and then printed, "Mow lawns." And if it made me wheeze? Well, I'd figure that out later.

Janet chewed her pencil. "Did you ever sell things door to door? You know, Christmas cards and things?"

"This is June," I reminded her.

"But there's other kinds of cards. Birthday and get-well cards and things. You know those ads in the magazines that say, sell greeting cards to your friends and neighbors and make lots and lots of money."

"Ummm." I didn't think much of that idea, and *I* sure as heck wouldn't do it. Knock on strange doors and maybe get 'em slammed in your face? No sirree. I underlined "Mow lawns" in black. I didn't like to see ol' Janet's list getting longer than mine. A guy ought to be able to do more than a girl. "Errands," I printed slowly and carefully.

"Oh, yes!" Janet peeked at my list and promptly added the new item to her own. "You know what? We could have an errand-running service! Tell every neighbor about it, then go around each morning and ask if they wanted anything . . ."

Boy, quick as ol' Janet got hold of an idea, she had to turn it into big business!

Janet was scribbling furiously. "Strawberries," she said. "There's already signs at the store for pickers. And a little later there'll be raspberries and blackberries. And after that, beans." She looked at my almost bare page and said, "You can put those down, too, and we'll pick together."

"Yeh?" She'd lived here a lot longer than me, so

maybe she knew what she was talking about. I sure didn't, but my list looked better with the extra items. "We ought to make enough, easy, with all this," I said. "How much d'you suppose we'll need? When's the puppy gonna be let out?"

"Friday," said Janet. "He'll have a cast on the broken leg, but the vet told Mama he'll be fine."

"Did he tell her how much it's gonna cost? Or how long we could take to pay the bill?" No, of course not. Really important questions like that, ol' Janet and her Mom wouldn't think of asking. "Well, we'll take care of it all right, all right."

Starting with my birthday money.

If I got any birthday money.

If Dad even remembered I had a birthday coming up.

He'd acted kind of funny since Sunday and the chess game. Not mad exactly, but sort of keeping to himself, thinking about something. Whistling a lot, too, so whatever he was thinking about must've pleased him.

Me, I'd just acted extra polite, not talking much for fear I'd say the wrong thing again. It was like I was a guest in the house—just visiting there, not really belonging. Not belonging anywhere any more.

"You look funny," Janet complained. "Are you worrying about the vet's bill?"

"Naw, why should I worry? We're gonna do fine. Hey," I couldn't sit around here any longer, "how about if we bike to the vet's and see the pup and find out how much we gotta pay?"

"Okay!" Ol' Janet zipped home to get her bike,

and at the last minute I remembered to tell Mrs. Moffett where I was going.

"She worries a lot," I explained to Janet.

The vet was busy, but the lady at the desk let us see the puppy for a couple of minutes. He looked pretty bouncy to me, already using his bad leg, tap-tapping around on his cast like Long John Silver. We petted him and talked to him and told him he'd be coming home with us soon. Then I got back quick to the front office before my chest exploded from trying to hold my breath the whole time.

"You know how much the bill's gonna be?" I asked the lady.

She began looking through the card file for the puppy's card. "I'm sure it will be very reasonable," she said. "The doctor only charges costs on a case like this." She took out a card, and looked at it, kind of puzzled. "It says here the charges are paid."

"Huh? Who?" Janet and I gulped.

"Did the owner turn up?" Janet asked.

"Is the doctor doing it free?" was my guess.

The lady said, "Just a minute, I'll find out."

When she came back from talking to the vet, she still looked puzzled but she was smiling. "Whoever it was didn't leave his name, just asked what the charges were on the lost puppy and paid in cash."

"But who is he? Is he coming back for the puppy?"

The lady shook her head.

"Then why—"

"I'd guess it was somebody who heard about the puppy and wanted to help," the lady suggested. "I'm sure everybody in your neighborhood knows about

the case, and doctor has even told his friends how well you took care of it. Some soft-hearted person decided to lend a hand. That does happen, you know."

Ol' Janet and I bicycled home in a pink cloud, shouting now and then at each other, "How about *that!* Wow! Neato!" But by the time we got home, the cloud was pierced by so many questions, it was pretty well shot.

"I just can't believe a stranger—" Janet frowned.

"Maybe the owner felt bad about dumping it," I guessed. "He didn't want the pup, but he snuck back and paid the bill."

"Anybody who'd dump a puppy wouldn't feel bad about anything!" Ol' Janet sounded pretty severe, but I had to agree with her.

We split as soon as we reached home. Janet wanted to tell her Mom and the kids about it, and I went in to tell Mrs. Moffett I was back. The lists we'd been making were still on the porch. I picked them up. Boy, we'd have certainly run our legs off doing all that stuff! Lucky a good samaritan had turned up to pay the bill.

But—y'know, it was funny; I felt kind of let down, as though maybe this knight business was habit forming, and all of a sudden I was fresh out of crusades!

Friday, little ol' Long John Silver came home from the vet's to Janet's house, tapping around as brisk and busy as if he'd been born with a plaster leg.

And Saturday I celebrated my birthday—if you

can call it celebrating when you've lost a ball game and it's your own dumb fault.

Dad took ol' Janet and me out for a birthday dinner afterward, a real kids' special with double burgers and french fries and the biggest banana splits ever. But we were all pretty glum. Dad and Janet had been at the game; they knew the Birds could've won if I'd slid for home plate.

It was the last inning, our last turn at bat; the score was even. Two Birds were already out, and I was on first when Jim got a hit. It wasn't all that good a hit—I mean, it shouldn't have been more than a single if the other team's shortstop hadn't bobbled his throw to hold me to second. The third baseman lunged after the ball while I steamed across second. It was a real dusty day; I was kicking up dust and breathing in dust and puffing harder at every step. But I made it to third. Then the third-base coach, watching that fumble-fingered third baseman, waved me on home.

It was going to be close. He knew it was close and the crowd knew it was close and everybody was yelling, "Slide! *Slide!*"

But I couldn't dive into that gritty gray cloud. I couldn't. I tried to make it standing up and got tagged out. In the extra inning, they got a run and we couldn't even get a guy to first base. We lost, when I'd practically been handed a win like a birthday gift.

So nobody had much to say at the birthday dinner and I guess everybody was as glad as me when it was over.

I said goodnight real quick when we got home and dived for my room. I was officially eleven years old, but I felt more like five. Five years old and stupid and bumbling. A wheezing little kid, trying to play games with the big boys.

Stupid, *stupid*, STUPID! I muttered to myself while I got ready for bed, and kicked the furniture, and slung my clothes so hard across the room I knocked the stuff off my desk. Would've been better if Dad and ol' Janet had come right out and said, "Boy, you sure muffed that one; you could've won the game . . ."

If you hadn't tiptoed in like a sissy instead of sliding. What were you scared of (they could've asked)—getting your uniform dirty?

I could have answered them then. I could have got mad and yelled, "I'll tell you why I couldn't slide—I was choking, that's why! What d'you expect of a guy that can't breathe?"

But no, they had to be so darn polite and keep their mouths shut.

I picked up the stuff I'd knocked off the desk. My ball-point and a couple of pencils and the lists ol' Janet and I had made out when we'd figured on going to work to bail out ol' Long John Silver. Stupid lists, stupid idea.

"Sure am lucky that guy paid the bill," I muttered.

Because I'd probably have muffed the jobs like I muffed the slide. And anyway, I hadn't got the birthday money I'd figured to use for the down payment.

Dad had given me a camera instead.

14

"Have you taken any pictures yet?" Janet asked a couple of days later.

"Nope," I said. How I felt must have leaked into the word because ol' Janet pounced on me right off.

"You don't like your camera," she said. "Why don't you like it?"

"Who said I didn't like it?" Boy, she could be exasperating!

"Well, do you?"

" 'Course I do!"

Janet weighed that answer and then said, "If *I'd* got a camera for *my* birthday, I'd be out taking pictures. Didn't you get any film with it?"

"Sure I got film—plenty of it!"

"Then let's get some pictures of Long John," she

proposed, "while he's still got his cast. So we can remember why he got his name. Okay?"

She was the absolute limit. Once she started burrowing after something, you might as well give up. Because she sure wouldn't!

I brought out the camera. It looked real easy to use. The film pack just snapped in, and the only setting was for distance. The instruction book said you could take pictures from as close as three feet. And Dad had added two snap-on lens attachments, one to give eighteen-inch close-ups, and a nine-inch one.

"You can get some great pictures with this little outfit," he'd said, and gone about his business, whistling.

I didn't need the whistle to make me suspicious. I was suspicious as soon as I opened the package. A camera from Dad—especially after that clash over the chessboard last Sunday—was kind of like a dare. Plain as words, it said: *Okay, so you think it's simple to snap a shutter? So try it!*

Well, I was going to try it all right; I just didn't want to be shoved, that's all.

But ol' Janet was the original shover.

"Let's take a picture now, Robbie," she pestered. "Where d'you want to take it? Over here or in our yard? He looks awfully cute sitting in the door of his doghouse—kind of slopped over sideways with his cast sticking out. Like he's saying, 'How'd I ever get stuck with *this* thing?' "

"Boy, you sure don't want much!" I muttered. But it'd be a cute picture all right, the kind Dad

was always looking for, so I loaded the camera and went along with The Pest . . .

And wished I'd stayed home. The whole afternoon was murder, pure murder; all we did was waste time and perfectly good film.

To begin with, Long John didn't get the idea of sitting still for his picture at all. Quick as Janet got him posed and I aimed the camera, he came tap-tapping over to see what I was doing.

"Pete's sake, can'tcha hold him a minute?" I yelled. I'd already snapped six or seven pictures and he'd been moving every time.

"Why does it take you so long to snap it?" ol' Janet asked. I could've murdered her.

"I got to get the blame thing focused, don't I?" I sputtered. "An' by the time I do that, he's up here looking in the view finder!"

"Well, you could focus on the doghouse first, couldn't you? Then you'd be ready, quick as I get Long John posed."

I had to admit that made sense, but I sure wasn't going to tell *her* so. I got down on one knee the right distance from the doghouse, centered the doorway in the view finder, and steadied the camera on my other knee and yelled, "Okay!"

And the next instant a furry face appeared in the view finder, the camera was knocked out of my hands (clicking as it fell), and Long John was on top of me, licking my face.

"I give up!" I roared. I got up and picked up the camera and stormed across the street.

"Get any pictures today?" Dad asked when he got home.

"Naw," I said carelessly. "Not yet."

"Be glad to develop 'em for you when you finish a roll of film," Dad offered.

"Sure. Thanks," I said. I carried the camera off to my room, casual-like, so he wouldn't see that the film in it was already almost used up. One thing I knew for sure—*he* wasn't going to develop that film!

But somebody had to. And I didn't know how to use the stuff in his darkroom. That meant I'd have to take the film to a drugstore and pay for the developing.

"Just till I get the hang of it," I told myself. After all, a guy had to practice, didn't he? But soon as I was getting neat pictures, I'd turn 'em over to Dad—sort of carelessly, you know—and say, "Hey, want to run these through the developer when you get a chance?" I wouldn't even add, "Might have something pretty nice there." I'd let him find out when the picture was developed.

Next day I finished up the first film—not on Long John; I gave up on him for the time being—and took pictures of things that stayed put, and dropped it off at the drugstore. I had a little saved from my allowance. Ought to be able to develop a couple of films without any sweat.

So I loaded the camera again and went at it. I snapped:

Some more shots of Long John with ol' Janet holding him.

Our house. Janet's house. Her Dad's car.

Tim and Mike together. Tim and Mike separately. Ol' Janet making a face.

Mrs. Moffett when she didn't know I was taking her picture. Mrs. Moffett squealing when she saw me with the camera. "What are you doing? At least let me get the rollers out of my hair! Robbie!"

And the second film was filled. I dropped that off at the drugstore, too, then decided I'd better hold up a while till I could check out how I was doing. And how much it was going to cost.

"You can pick 'em up end of the week," the guy at the store said.

So I put the camera away for a few days till I could look at the prints and see what I needed more practice on. One more film ought to do it. And even in the practice films, I might have got something that'd make Dad's eyebrows perk up.

And stop him whistling.

15

Ol' Janet came yelling out of her yard to stop me, one afternoon about a week later, just as I got home from baseball practice.

"Long John's lost!" she cried.

"Again?" I yelped. He had to be the goingest pup in dog history. Even with a plaster leg, he was forever taking off, finding holes in the fence—or making them—whenever he got the urge to explore. "We oughta named him Columbus," I grumbled.

"We've been all over the neighborhood," Janet said worriedly, "Timmy and Mike and me. And nobody's seen him."

"Well, they'd remember if they had," I admitted. How many times did you see a plaster-leg pup running loose? "You ever figure how we're gonna keep him home when he's got four good legs?"

"We'll just have to *train* him to stay home," Janet frowned over the problem. "We'll take him for lots of long, long walks, and teach him that he does his exploring with us, not alone."

"Sure we will!" I hooted. "An' after school starts, he's gonna stay home thinkin' about all that, waitin' for us, huh? He'll be off after the school bus, fast as you can say Long John Silver Christopher Columbus!"

Janet heaved a big sigh. "That's about how long it takes him to dig under the fence, all right." She gave herself a little shake, sort of like Long John might have shaken off a fly. "Well, we'll figure that out when the time comes."

I put away my stuff and told Mrs. Moffett what was up, and then ol' Janet and me got on our bikes and started off. Like I said, it's a funny suburb; you follow one of the little winding lanes that leads off the main road, and all of a sudden you could be in woods that look like nobody's settled the country yet.

Mostly the trees are just a screen for some big fancy place with acres of landscaping, once you find it. But it wouldn't have surprised me a bit to pop out of the trees into an Indian campground, with a bonfire going, and squaws baking a catch of fish in the hot ashes, and braves sitting cross-legged in front of their tepees.

That's how wild it looked from the road. No wonder Long John liked it. He's a born explorer; you should see him lift his nose and sniff the breeze as soon as a new scent drifts his way—and then strug-

gle and fight and claw his way to go investigate it.

"He oughta live on a ranch," I said, "with a lot of sheep to keep in line. Bet there'd never be a lost lamb in his flock!"

We reached the end of the road; there was only a footpath now. Ahead of us, the trees climbed steeply up the side of Black Butte.

"Well, he wouldn't have gone this far," Janet admitted. "We might as well go look someplace else." But she hesitated before she turned back. We'd found Long John around here before; the woodsy wild smells seemed to make a big hit with him.

I stalled, too, but not because I still expected Long John to appear. I'd spotted a big brown bird circling above the trees, halfway up Black Butte. "D'ya see that?" I asked Janet.

She frowned at the bird. "Just a hawk, isn't it?"

"That's what a lotta guys with guns think," I scolded. "You know how many eagles get killed every year just 'cause hunters think they're hawks? Enough to practic'ly wipe out eagles, that's how many."

"You mean it's an eagle?" Ol' Janet was looking harder now.

"That's just it—you can't tell from here when the bird's young. It doesn't get its eagle markings till later. But when you see a big brown bird, don't shoot, that's all!"

Janet said severely, "I wouldn't anyway. You know that."

Now it was her turn to stall and look up at the

butte. "If we went on a camp-out and climbed Black Butte, maybe we'd see it closer—even finds its nest."

"Sure we would!" I scoffed. "Have to go clear to the top for that. I can just see you legging it to the top of Black Butte!"

"Well, we wouldn't have to do it in one day," she said, still looking back at the butte sort of wistfully. "We could camp out overnight . . ."

"You're just plain balmy!" I hooted, and wheeled back toward the main road. Ol' Janet caught up with me pretty quick, but you could see she was still sighing inside about her goofy camping idea.

She said, "We got a letter from Junie today. He's just crazy about that camp, every minute of it. They're working with climbing ropes right now. He can already climb a straight-up cliff."

I shook my head. "He's nuttier than you are."

"Well, you have to know things like that if you're going to climb mountains."

"I wasn't figuring to climb any mountains," I said, putting a big black period to that line of talk.

And then we saw Long John, limping kind of tiredly out of a clump of berry bushes, his coat dirty and matted with thorns.

"Long John!" Janet cried. "Just look at you!"

He flapped his thorny tail and woofed a greeting and didn't object one bit to getting a ride home in my bicycle basket, though he got scolded the whole way.

At the Kernan house, ol' Janet lugged him into the back yard to give him a currying job, and I decided to go pick up my films. Dad was beginning

to drop a lot of strong hints about the camera, like how was I doing, had I filled any film yet, and how about bringing the camera along on a Saturday hike with him? So I figured I'd better find out quick how my practice films had turned out.

I emptied my money jar into my pockets and biked down to the drugstore. The pictures were ready, all right.

"That'll be a dollar twenty," the clerk said.

"Wow!" I counted out nickels and dimes, getting redder by the second. I mean, on an allowance of fifty cents a week—and fifty ways to spend it—it takes a while for the leftover cash to amount to anything. Dumb, dumb, I was mumbling to myself, *why hadn't I counted it first?* Just because it felt heavy didn't mean it added up to much. But I hadn't figured it'd cost all *that* to develop a couple of films.

I was sweating by the time I reached a dollar twenty—and there was only six cents left to put back in my pocket.

"Some of those pictures just better be good," I muttered, waiting till I got outside the drugstore to open the envelope. I sure couldn't keep paying that sort of price for developing films—and pretty soon having to buy my own film packs, too.

I ripped open the envelope and sifted through the prints . . .

And my heart settled right down in my dusty loafers.

They were awful, that's all, just awful. Not enough light in some, and too much in others. Some pictures blurred, some crooked. Some objects way

too close, some so far away you couldn't tell what I was aiming at.

And I'd wasted two films and a dollar-twenty on this mess!

Anyway, Dad hadn't seen the pictures. I could be thankful for that. "And he isn't going to see any," I promised myself, "till I get the hang of that blamed camera!"

It shouldn't take all that long . . . maybe one more film pack. Or two. And where was I going to get the money to develop *them?*

I took a deep breath. Looked like I'd have a use for those lists Janet and I'd made out after all. Looked like I'd be needing a job.

16

"Mow lawns."

That headed the list I'd written, the day Janet and me were figuring how to bail Long John out of his hospital. Before somebody turned up and did it for us.

And who was that, anyway? I couldn't figure anybody paying a bill that size and not even wanting a thank you for his trouble. Guess I would have felt easier about it if I *could* have said "thank you." This way, it was like a dangling shoelace; I had a feeling it might trip me up sometime.

Like how? Like maybe finding out it was all a big mistake and nobody'd paid it after all?

Anyway, who'd pay out that much money and not want a thank you? Unless it *was* the owner—feeling guilty about having shoved the pup out of his car,

thinking maybe somebody could've seen him, scared that the S.P.C.A. might be after him?

I put the nagging question to the back of my mind and frowned at the list.

"Mow lawns."

Whose lawn? With what? We just had a hand mower; Dad's yard was so small, he didn't think it worthwhile buying a power mower. I could just see myself trundling around a really big place with that ol' hand mower! But maybe they'd have their own power mower and I could use that. 'Course I couldn't charge as much if I used their mower . . .

And what should I charge, anyway?

I heaved a big sigh and chewed my pencil. Seemed like all I'd come up with so far was questions. I bet ol' Janet knew what to charge for mowing lawns, but I sure wasn't gonna ask *her*. She'd feel so all-fired smart at knowing something I didn't know . . .

"Hey, Janet, what's it worth to mow a lawn?" (Sure I asked her, first thing next morning. I had to find out, didn't I?)

She didn't act at all cocky. She just sat down on the porch steps and frowned, like it was a real serious problem. "Well, it'd go by size, wouldn't it? I think Junie got a couple of dollars for mowing the Abel's yard down the street. It's pretty small. But I remember once he got five dollars for doing one of those real big places."

"I bet he took along a mower, too," I said glumly. The Kernans had a real nice power mower.

Janet nodded. She could see the problem right away. "It's going to take you a while if you use your

mower, isn't it?" She sounded worried and sympathetic, and I wondered why I'd stalled even a minute about asking her for help. She wasn't smart-alecky. Not one bit.

It wouldn't be the energy to push the mower that'd bother me so much (I was thinking); it was the dust and pollen I'd be breathing in while I puffed along behind the blamed thing. I wondered how silly I'd look if I wore one of those filter masks that cover your nose and mouth. Maybe I ought to mow in a white hospital gown and cap and rubber gloves! I could advertise that I "operated" on lawns!

"What's funny?" Janet asked.

"Nothin'," I said. I got up and flexed my arm muscles. "Well, guess I'd better get to work."

She didn't ask why all of a sudden I wanted to mow lawns. She didn't pester me to find out why I needed money. She just said, "Is it all right if I come along?"

"Sure," I said, real casual—as though it wasn't the biggest favor she could offer, backing me up when I had to ring those doorbells.

We started out right away (I wanted to get going before I lost my nerve). Janet was a big help, she knew which houses to skip because big kids lived there who took care of their own lawns, and which houses were good bets because Junie had worked there. Even so, it took us till noon to find a place that needed a mowing job.

"You'll bring your own mower, won't you?" the little old lady asked.

"Sure," I said. "Let's see . . ." I looked at her yard

like I was feeding figures into a computer, and asked, "Is two dollars okay?" I really wanted to ask for more—it was a pretty big yard and the grass was high—but I couldn't get the words out.

"That's just fine!" she said, so quick and happy I knew I hadn't asked enough.

I kind of expected ol' Janet would point that out, but all she said was, "There! Once you get your first job, the others come easy. You'll see."

And off she went about her own business, while I went home to tell Mrs. Moffett I'd better have plenty of protein for lunch because I was going to need it.

And boy, did I ever!

17

When I started on that lawn, right after lunch, I was so busy congratulating myself I almost didn't notice what hard work it was.

Wow, two bucks for this—I practically laughed out loud while I trotted after the old mower. Why, that'd pay for developing a couple more films, and who needed more than that? I mean, you'd have to be an *idjit* not to learn how to use a simple little ol' camera with that much practice.

It was a real hot afternoon—not hot like it used to get back in Iowa ("corn weather," Grandpa called it), but up around ninety degrees. If you stayed home on a cool shady porch, drinking lemonade, you'd say it was a pretty fine summer day. But out in the middle of a big dusty lawn, pushing a cranky

handmower that soon began to act like it hadn't been oiled or sharpened since it left the factory . . .

I shucked off my sweaty shirt, and pretty quick after that, my T-shirt. My pants clung to my legs like slippery snakeskin, but I couldn't very well peel *them* off. I quit trotting in a hurry and settled down to an old tired farm-horse plod.

Dust rose from the grass. I sneezed. Once I started sneezing, it seemed like everything set me off. I could look at a ladybug and sneeze.

I stopped for a minute to get my breath and wipe the sweat off my face. Then I tied my handkerchief around my head, so it covered my nose and mouth. I bet I looked like an outlaw about to hold up a stagecoach. But by that time I didn't care. I was hanging on to that lawnmower handle like a drowning man'd hang on to a piece of driftwood.

The little old lady looked the lawn over real careful before she opened her pocketbook and began counting out two dollars in small change.

"You didn't rake," she complained, closing her fist over the coins. "Look at all that hay! If it isn't raked up, it'll kill the grass, you know."

I could see why her lawn got so high between mowings! Bet no kid came to her place twice. Bet she'd just plain run out of kids.

I said, "Is it all right if I rake it tomorrow? It's gettin' pretty late—" and I was pretty pooped, but I sure wouldn't tell her that!

She pursed her lips and frowned and said, "It really ought to be raked this evening . . ."

"I could do it real early," I suggested. I just had

to get that mower back before Dad got home to see me and wonder why I was so suddenly ambitious.

She hesitated some more, then dropped the coins back in her pocketbook and closed it with a firm click. "Well, all right, I'll pay you when you finish."

Boy, that did it! I was so sore I sputtered to myself all the way home. *Won't catch me going back there, nossir! She can keep her two dollars and rake that ol' lawn herself! Or find another sucker—*

Because I sure wasn't going back! Nossir, not me.

I shoved the mower into the garage and put on my shirt so Mrs. Moffett wouldn't notice how red my arms were. I kept my hands in my pockets, too; they felt so tender I didn't have to look at 'em to know I was raising a crop of blisters.

Even so, Mrs. Moffett cried, "Robbie, what have you been doing? Just look at you!"

"Uh, nothin'," I said, slipping past her fast. "I better get a bath before supper."

"I should hope so! And put those filthy garments in the laundry hamper!" (I could hear her scolding me even after I'd closed the bathroom door between us.) "I don't know what's become of your good sense, Robbie—playing so hard on so hot a day!"

Playing, huh? I eased into the tub and winced as the hot water lapped over my back and arms. Blisters were already puffing up on the palms of my hands. If my back looked like my arms—and it sure felt like it—I'd got myself the granddaddy of all sunburns.

I sank down in the tub till the water covered my chin. Wow, whatta day! Sure wouldn't ever do *that*

again. Kill myself for two bucks—hah! Tomorrow I was gonna lie out in the yard under a tree and suck ice cubes. Yessir.

So what if I didn't earn any money to develop any pictures? Who cared about stupid ol' pictures anyway?

Not me. Nosir, not me.

18

So I wasn't going back, was I? Hah!

Quick as Dad left for work the next morning, I nipped down the street to the little old lady's house. I hurt from the top of my head to the soles of my feet. I'd put cotton pads and tape over my blistered palms, but I couldn't do anything about my sunburned back, and the loose old soft shirt I'd put on scratched like sandpaper.

But dawgonnit, I'd *earned* that two bucks and I was going to collect it! Even if that meant raking up a stack of dusty hay under an already sizzling sun.

You'd think the old lady would've been happy to see me; I bet a lot of kids might not have showed up again (I almost hadn't). But first crack out of the box, she complained, "You said you'd be here early. Just look at that sun!"

I didn't have to look at the sky to see how high the sun was; I could feel it. But she didn't care about that. I said, "You got a rake I can use?"

She cried, "You mean you didn't bring your own?"

That was the absolute living end. I was ready to believe she didn't want me to finish the job; she was pushing me to the point where I'd get mad and walk off and she'd be two dollars ahead. Well, I was mad all right, but I wasn't going anywhere till I had that money. So I just said, "No, ma'am."

She fussed all the way to the tool shed, where she got out a bamboo rake. "This cost good money, you know . . . and it breaks, if you're not careful . . . first thing I know, I'll be buying a new rake every time the lawn's mowed . . ."

I had a feeling she'd subtract the cost of the rake from my two dollars if I snapped a single bamboo prong. So I raked real easy and careful, just brushing the loose grass into neat piles . . .

And then—sure enough!—she had me lugging all the piles to the compost heap at the back of her lot. I'm surprised she didn't want her garbage hauled out to add to it!

By now I was sizzling hotter than the sun. Exercise had loosened all the creaky joints and muscles that were creaking when I'd waked up this morning, but my back burned like somebody'd run a hot iron over it. And my hands—wow! I wondered how I'd ever again close them around a bat handle.

I sneezed again. I'd sneezed and blown my nose

and sneezed and blown my nose till it was about worn out.

The old lady popped out to say severely, "Young man, you ought to do something about that cold."

"Yes'm," I said. People always think hay fever is a cold; I get tired trying to explain the difference.

"Sneezing spreads germs, you know," she added.

I muffled the next sneeze in my soggy handkerchief, then quickly stuffed it in my pocket before she could point out how unsanitary *that* was.

At last I was done. That lawn was neat as a new manicure—clipped and polished and shining clean. I straightened up cautiously, scared that my sunburned hide might crack like the Grand Canyon if I moved too fast, and marched up to the house to get my money. She just better not stall this time! I was bristling with arguments to meet any complaint she might come up with . . .

And you know what? She was ready and waiting with three dollars!

"Naturally I intended to pay extra for the raking," she said, when I gulped with shock over that weight of quarters and dimes. "You've done a very nice job, I must say. Now take care of that cold."

"Yes, ma'am!" I promised. I could've whooped and hollered all the way home. Sunburn, blisters, aches and pains—what difference did they make? Three bucks—wow!

It was already noon. I sagged down on our front steps and figured out all the pictures I was going to take, soon as I got my breath back. With three bucks in my pocket, it didn't matter that I was down to

my last film pack; I'd buy another and develop that, too, if I had to.

But I didn't figure to make any mistakes on this next film; it was going to be the very last practice I needed. I'd be real careful about not letting light get into the view finder—and setting the camera on something so it didn't jiggle—and focusing right so I didn't chop off the top or bottom of what I aimed at—and making sure nothing was moving . . .

Nothing moving . . . nothing . . .

"Robbie, are you all right?"

Mrs. Moffett was bending over me, her face wrinkled with worry. I must've been really asleep, not to have heard the clatter of her bike tipping over. But there it lay in the driveway, the wheels still spinning.

"I'm okay," I said. I got up so quick it made me dizzy, and reeled over to set her bike on its kickstand. My shirt was stuck to my back; I winced when I pulled it loose.

Mrs. Moffett cried, "What *have* you been up to, Robbie? You look terrible, just simply terrible. My goodness, what a start you gave me, lying on the steps like that!"

In a flurry of exclamations, she shooed me into the house and toward the tub. "Now just get a good, long soak," she ordered, "while I put together something nourishing. And cool. Dear me, you're red as a beet!"

I shut the bathroom door on her firmly, but her voice went on outside of it. ". . . Not even sense

enough to stay out of the sun . . . whatever were you doing, Robbie? Are you trying to make yourself sick?"

Her complaints faded as she went toward the kitchen. I slid down gingerly into the cool water and wished I could stay here forever. Like a fish. Like a water baby . . .

Ulp! I woke up sputtering and splashing when water sloshed up my nose. Guess I wasn't a water baby yet—still needed air—

Mrs. Moffett was pounding on the door. "Robbie, what happened? *Robbie, are you all right?*"

I was getting kind of sick of being asked that question. How did *I* know if I was all right? I crawled out of the tub, still blowing water bubbles from my nose, and grumbled, "Sure I'm all right. Why wouldn't I be all right? Only half drownded, that's all." I scowled at my back in the mirror. "Half drownded, and half scalded, that's all."

"Robbie, will you quit muttering to yourself and come out of there?" Mrs. Moffett had never sounded cross before, but she sure did now. I decided I'd worried her enough for one day, so I patted myself dry real carefully and got dressed again.

Mrs. Moffett still didn't look too happy with me. "Just don't know what you're up to," she fussed while she watched me eat lunch. "Utterly worn out, that's what you are—collapsing like that—"

"I was asleep!" I protested.

"—and no appetite," she went right on. "Out all day, doing the Lord knows what—coming home exhausted—and not eating!"

"I am too eating," I pointed out. But I wasn't, not very much anyway. I drank a lot of lemonade and pushed the food around so it'd look like there was less, and slid out from under her eagle-eyed inspection. "Gotta go. See ya."

"Robbie Foskett, where are you going now?"

I muttered something and zipped out of there. The camera, loaded and ready, was stashed in my bike basket. I was halfway down the block before Mrs. Moffett reached the front porch.

No photographer—I don't care how famous he was—ever took more pains over his pictures than I did that afternoon. They just *had* to be good; I hadn't made one mistake, not one. I dropped the exposed film off at the drugstore and bought another film pack. It didn't matter that buying the new film, plus developing the old, would about use up my three bucks. This was the last developing I'd have to pay for. Today I was graduated from practicing. I was betting on it—I was betting my whole three bucks on it. . . .

I wobbled home and got the bike back in the garage and eased down on the front steps before my knees completely buckled.

Ol' Janet promptly popped over from across the street. "Where have you been all day, Robbie? I went to the store to sign up for strawberry picking, but they don't need any more pickers now. I guess the strawberries are about all picked. Blackberries are getting ripe, though. Do you want to pick berries tomorrow, Robbie?"

"Oh, boy," I said. I slid lower on the steps.

"Well, do you? Mr. Bertleson down at the store will buy all we pick. He always does. Robbie, don't go to sleep while I'm talking. Robbie, you aren't sick, are you? Mrs. Moffett!"

19

"Just simply too much sun," Mrs. Moffett was saying.

I opened my eyes and found I was lying on the couch in the living room. How in heck did I get here? Mrs. Moffett and ol' Janet must've walked me into the house sound asleep. Both of them were peering down at me like I was dead or something. "Hey," I said, starting to sit up.

Mrs. Moffett pushed me flat again. It didn't take much effort; I collapsed easy.

"Practically nothing to eat," Mrs. Moffett scolded. "Out all day doing who knows what." She started to ease off my shirt. "Just look at that back!"

"Hey," I protested, trying to sit up again.

Mrs. Moffett paid no attention. "I'll just get some

oil for your back and then you're going straight to bed." She bustled out of the room.

Ol' Janet stared at me, owl-eyed. "That's an awful sunburn."

"Awww, it's not all that bad."

"Yes, it is. And look at your hands!"

"Pete's sake, you sound like Mrs. Moffett!"

"Well, you ought to take care of yourself, Robbie. I bet you didn't wear a cap . . ."

"A' *course* I didn't!"

"And you took off your shirt—"

"Well, my gosh, it was *hot!*"

Ol' Janet shook her head like I was a backward child. "It's the clothes that keep you *cool.* Look how Arabs dress in the desert, all those robes and things."

It was tough to admit she was right—but she was. "Didn't think it'd take me so long to finish," I said. "Boy, what that old lady wanted for two bucks was a full-time gardener!"

"I know," said Janet. "Junie only went there once."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, I didn't know anyplace else, not for sure. She *always* needs somebody to mow her lawn."

"I can see why." I tried to turn over and yelped as the rough upholstery touched my back.

Mrs. Moffett came hurrying back with a jar of something. "Now you go along home, Janet," she ordered. "I'm going to get this boy greased and up to his own bed. If his father sees him like this, he'll think I'm no caretaker at all. Though how I can

keep track of somebody who just disappears, Lord knows where—"

"See you tomorrow," Janet said quickly, and got out of there.

The stuff Mrs. Moffett put on my back felt good. I could feel the heat oozing out of my skin, and for the first time in two days I wasn't scared I'd crack open if I moved. Mrs. Moffett steered me upstairs to my room, though I could've got there perfectly all right on my own.

"I'll just bring you a thermos of lemonade," she said, puttering off, busy as Grandma and Mrs. Wexler put together. "And water with a salt tablet—I wouldn't be surprised if you were totally dehydrated."

When I woke up again, it was dinnertime; Dad was home. I could hear Mrs. Moffett giving him the entire news bulletin, with lots of extras and exclamation points. She brought up my dinner on a tray, with Dad right behind her.

"Mostly liquids," she said, fussing with the pillows to prop me up. "And see that you drink every drop."

"Aw, gee, I could just as well have come downstairs." I was getting embarrassed by all this attention, especially with Dad standing there.

"Tomorrow is soon enough for that," she said firmly. "I want to see you looking a great deal stronger, not passing out every other minute—"

"I wasn't—I didn't—" But she had bustled off and I was alone with Dad. I couldn't start in on dinner with him there; probably he thought I was

putting on an act, making a big bid for attention and sympathy.

He watched me for a minute, not saying anything. The silence stretched out like a rubber band. Then it snapped.

"Want to talk about it?" Dad asked.

"Talk about what?" I examined the dinner tray with great interest.

"About what you're up to," he said.

"Whaddya mean, what I'm up to?" My voice got kind of high. I hauled it back down. "I'm not doin' anything."

"So you don't want to talk about it," Dad said, low and thoughtful, like he was thinking out loud.

I picked up my glass of milk and drank it slowly, swallow by swallow, without setting down the glass. It gave me something to hide behind. When I finally put it down, Dad was gone.

I was pretty shook. For a minute there, I thought he'd guessed what I was trying to do. And I didn't see how he could. I'd been real careful about the camera, keeping it hidden in my bike basket under an old sweater, so Mrs. Moffett wouldn't spot me carrying it in or out of the house.

Even Janet didn't know where I went or what I was doing when I went off to take my practice pictures. If I'd told her, "I gotta learn how to use this thing," she'd have said, "Why don't you ask your Dad? He knows all about taking pictures."

She wouldn't understand that's just why I *couldn't* ask him.

I felt all right again by the next day, but it was

pretty nice to lie around and let Mrs. Moffett wait on me, so I didn't fight it.

Ol' Janet steamed across the street later in the day, with that look on her face that said they'd got another letter from Junie.

"Maybe the last one," she said when she got her breath. "He'll be home pretty soon—not much more'n a week now. The only real big thing left is the Solo."

Her eyes went big and dark. "Just think, he'll be going out for three days and two nights—all by himself in the wilderness. . . ."

Just the thought of it made me uneasy. I wished she'd quit talking about it like it was a glorious experience. What sort of nut was Junie anyway, to *want* to do that kind of thing? The same sort of nut as all the Kernans, I decided, ol' Janet included. Ol' Janet most of all!

"No food—" she was going on with it, glowing like a candle, "—all he'll take with him is some fishhooks and string, a few matches, a piece of plastic to sleep under—"

"Pete's sake!" I yelped. "What's so great about that? Seems like he'd be a lot smarter to stay home where he's sure of three meals a day and a bed under a roof."

Ol' Janet looked at me with those big round owl eyes. She said, "But he's learning what he can do if he *doesn't* have three meals and a roof!"

I gave up. The Kernans lived in a different world, over there across the street, and I'd never understand it.

A letter from Junie always got ol' Janet more excited about earning money for her Outward Bound fund. "Do you want to pick blackberries?" she asked me again. "Mr. Bertleson will give us thirty-five cents a pound—and the bushes are just thick with them, Robbie, around the butte. I was over there yesterday—Long John got loose again—and I could've picked a whole kettleful just while I looked for him."

I tested my sunburn cautiously. It really wasn't that bad any more, but shucks, who wanted to go grubbing in a bunch of prickly bushes if you didn't need the money?

"I dunno," I stalled. "Maybe later. I'm pretty burned yet."

"He certainly is!" Mrs. Moffett declared, bringing out tall glasses of Kool-Aid. "And he's not going farther than this porch, young lady! Do you want him collapsing again?"

"No, ma'am," Janet said. She drank her Kool-Aid and eased back across the street.

I made the most of my sunburn for a week, then I got bored with lying around. Friday night I peeled off my shirt and took a good look at my back in the mirror. The burned skin had just about all flaked off. I'd been hoping I'd end up with a great tan, but the color was more a loud pink. Oh, well, my face and arms were a lot browner anyway.

I'd missed baseball practice all week, as well as last Saturday's game, but I decided I was well enough to play now. So I showed up at the field the next day, ready to be welcomed back.

The welcome was kind of cool. "Missed you at practice," the Birds' coach said.

"Well, I had this bad sunburn," I explained.

He didn't seem terribly impressed, so I plunged on, building it up. "I got sick and everything—just made it home and passed out on the front steps—it was sure an awful burn."

He said, "Then you'd better take it easy. Matthew will start."

That wasn't what I wanted at all. I said, "Oh, I'm okay now! Won't hurt me a bit if I play . . ."

"But it might hurt the team," he said, "since you haven't practiced all week. Matthew has worked out very faithfully."

So there I sat on the bench through four rotten innings, watching the Birds get beat, gritting my teeth while Matthew muffed signals and fumbled catches and threw the ball wild. When the coach put me in at last, I was sputtering like a teakettle about to boil. I caught that ball as if there was a magnet in my mitt, and threw it right to the mark I aimed at. And when I got to bat, still sizzling, I got a two-run homer for the Birds' first score of the day. There, that'd show 'em, I sizzled to myself; they better not leave *me* sitting on the bench!

Then in the last inning I spoiled the whole hero act . . . ran back to try to spear a wild foul, smacked into the fence and sprawled in the dust like a clumsy beginner.

But nobody laughed. The coach yelled, "Nice try, Foskett!" and the first baseman whacked me on my sore back and shouted, "Y'almost got it, Robbie!"

and the pitcher yelped, "Gimme that ball! We'll get 'em yet!"

And we did! Won in an extra inning, four to three! I was so high, I was giddier than the day I got sunburned. I yelled myself hoarse. I was still letting out hoots when, after a candy bar and ice-cream cone, I biked down to the drugstore to collect my pictures.

It was a day of triumph—only fair that the pictures should finish it off by being just great. I opened the envelope confidently, and leafed through the prints . . .

And leafed through them again. And then once more. When I put them back in the envelope, all the triumph had leaked out of me.

20

What was wrong with them? Every print had come out good—not a one blurred or crooked or chopped off or streaked with light. So why were they such duds? Halfway home, I stopped to look at them again.

There was one of a parked car, so clear you could see what make it was, even read the license plate. And another of a mailbox, sharp enough to show the hours of collection. And a snap of a street sign . . . and my bike, propped on its kickstand . . . and a rosebush . . . and a gate . . .

And they all added up to nothing. Just plain nothing.

I puzzled over the problem the rest of the way home. I'd figured that once I got a clear picture I

had the camera licked. Well, here I had a whole envelope of clear pictures—so what?

Ol' Janet was hopping up and down on her front walk, waiting for me to show. She'd been at the game. I'd seen her sprinting back and forth to watch the Birds and Timmy's team, too. "Oh, Robbie, you were splendid!" she yelled, soon as I came in sight. "I was so *proud* of you!"

"Pete's sake," I mumbled, redder than when I'd been sunburned, "d'ya have to tell the whole town about it?"

"Why not? You were great! When you blasted that home run, I thought it'd go all the way to Timmy's field!"

"Yeh," I said, perking up a bit at the memory. It'd been a good day, even if the pictures had turned out to be a bunch of nothing. I could always take more pictures; the camera was loaded with fresh film. "Hey, you still want to pick berries?"

"Oh, yes!" Ol' Janet bounced some more. "D'you want to go, too, Robbie? Shall we go Monday?"

"First thing after breakfast," I promised. Picking berries sounded like a lot easier way to earn money than mowing lawns. And it looked like I was going to need more money, all right.

I studied the prints some more that night—especially the one of the gate. I remembered that when I took that one, I had to wait quite a while for the dog in the yard to go away. He kept poking his head through the pickets to see what I was doing, and I didn't want anything moving when I snapped the shutter. But if I'd got that fuzzy head in the picture,

with its perked-up ears and questioning nose . . . even if it blurred a little . . . wouldn't it have been better? Anyway, less of a nothing?

When Dad went off to do the grocery shopping Sunday, I didn't go along.

"Nothin' special I want," I said, though usually I had a list as long as Mrs. Moffett's.

"Nothing?" Dad asked, sort of unbelievingly. And he looked at me the way he'd been doing these past two weeks, as though he was feeding facts into a computer and any minute the machine would start whirring and clicking and out would pop the answer.

That's what I was afraid of. Seemed to me that what I was doing was plain as newspaper headlines. Here it was three weeks since my birthday and I hadn't come up with any film for him to develop. Well, a kid doesn't get a birthday present and not give it a try—Dad was sure to guess I was sneaking the camera out to see what I could do with it. Wasn't he? Sooner or later? And when he did, I was sure gonna feel like a stupe, having to admit I *didn't* know how to take pictures, that there was a lot more to it than I'd thought.

While he was down at the store, I went into the darkroom to look through a folder of his pictures. I don't guess I'd ever really looked at them before . . . real hard, frowning over the details. What made his pictures good while mine were just dumb?

Kids in the park with their pets . . . Papa Robin with his worm, and all the open beaks waiting for it . . . an old, old granny rocking on her porch with

a baby playing at her feet . . . a little kid bawling, and up above him, snagged in a branch, a balloon . . .

They all told a story. *They all told a story.*

I wobbled out of the darkroom like a punch-drunk fighter. I *was* punch drunk. While I'd been hopping around the ring, flinging my fists in every direction, I'd been sockoed by an uppercut to the jaw.

There was more to picture taking than getting a clear print of something. That was the whole truth of it. Pictures—like words—could tell a story, make you feel something, happy, sad, warm, laughing, hungry, tearful.

So where did that leave me? Right back at the beginning. Starting out with a fresh film, looking for a picture with a story. Wow, that might take a little while . . .

And more than a little money.

Maybe a whole lot of money.

21

"You're aw'fly early," Janet said when I turned up Monday morning.

"Well, you want to pick a slug of berries, don't you? C'mon, Long John, you're gonna get enough exercise today to keep you home a week."

"Hah, I don't guess that'd ever happen! Not if we walked him to the top of the butte and back." Janet sighed a little as she wheeled her bike out of the garage. "The bigger that puppy gets, the more world he wants to see."

We pedaled out toward the country, Long John loping alongside our wheels, happy as a kid at a picnic, woofing now and then from just plain high spirits. Janet was right; he sure liked to go. No yard was ever going to satisfy him till he was old

and tired and had been 'round the world—a couple of times.

Ol' Janet claimed to know where the plumpest, juiciest berries were. We parked our bikes in some bushes at the foot of a sunny slope, and began shoving and pushing our way toward the top. We'd each brought two big kettles, even though I hadn't thought we'd find enough berries to fill one of them. But the higher we climbed, the thicker the berry bushes grew.

It was plenty hot to begin with and it got hotter in a hurry.

"Where you goin'?" I protested. Janet just kept on scrambling ahead of me, not stopping to pick any berries on the way.

"The very best ones are on top," she called back. "You'll see."

"Hah!" I didn't know whether I'd see or not. The hillside was one blamed thorn after another. I'd already pulled myself loose from about a thousand trailing vines that reached out and grabbed me. Many more scratches, I thought, frowning at my bare arms, and I'd look like a pirate's map drawn in blood. "This is far enough for me."

Ol' Janet peered back down at me. Perched on one leg, pulling loose a thorny vine, she looked for all the world like a worried stork. "Are you okay, Robbie?"

"Course I'm okay!" I yelped. "Just bleeding to death, that's all."

"You should've worn a sweater," she fretted, "a heavy sweater with long sleeves."

"On a day like this?" But I could see the point; fact is, I was *feeling* the point every time a thorn gouged me. It was like the day I got sunburned, mowing that lawn barebacked instead of wearing a blanket or something. If I kept up this life, I'd have to get used to the idea that clothes didn't just keep you warm; they were a sort of armor.

I caught up with Janet, talking plenty to myself under my breath, but not saying any more out loud.

Ol' Janet beamed at me. "I knew you could make it," she said. "Junie says you never know *what* you can do, till you do it."

I was getting pretty sick of having Junie quoted at me—you'd think he was Confucius or somebody—but I kept my mouth clamped shut and went to work. Janet was right; the berries up here on the hilltop were super. For a while I ate as many as I plopped into the kettle. Then I settled down and picked steadily, not talking, not eating, getting a little hotter and a little grimmer every minute.

When the sun was shining square down on top of us, the kettles were full—and they were plenty heavy. Those had to be the fattest berries anybody ever offered for sale. No wonder Mr. Bertleson had promised to take all we brought in, sight unseen. He knew the Kernans; if the best berries grew on top of the hill, that's where they'd go.

My knees wobbled and my head felt like it was bursting with the sunshine it had soaked in. But I got down the hill, through all that thorny jungle, without spilling a berry. We hung the kettles on our handlebars and whistled for Long John. For a won-

der he came without having to be tracked down. Guess he'd had enough sun and thorns, too. Ol' Janet sighed when she looked at his coat.

"I'll help curry him," I promised. I didn't like the job; there'd be too much tickly dog hair floating around to suit me. But I couldn't leave all the dirty work up to Janet. So maybe she was a pest sometimes, with her kangaroo hops and her flappy ideas and her Junie quotes; still, a guy'd have to look pretty far to find a better friend. I mean, look how she'd dug in to help me earn money and never once asked why I needed it.

Mr. Bertleson rubbed his hands and practically purred over the berries. Never saw a man pay out money with such pleasure. I had a feeling we could've earned more if we'd sold the berries door to door. But I wasn't keen about knocking on strange doors; and anyway, it was good to feel the solid weight of that much money in the pocket.

We spent some of it right off on candy bars and dog chewies for Long John. Mr. Bertleson peered at him, tethered to my bike at the curb.

"Sure growing," he said. "Doesn't look much like that sign on the bulletin board any more."

"Is that still up?" Janet asked. We went around to look at it.

"Maybe we ought to take it down," I suggested. But neither of us had quite given up. Ol' Janet didn't want to believe anybody could be so mean he'd shove a puppy out to die. And me—well, I guess I didn't want to believe it either. I borrowed a marking pencil from Mr. Bertleson and added a

black line: "He's bigger now—*a real fine dog.*" It seemed to make up to him somehow—a little bit, anyway—for nobody coming forward to claim him.

"You want to pick again tomorrow?" Janet asked while we pedaled home. I had to laugh; she was about as scratched and dirty and beat as a kid could get—and she could talk about doing it all over again.

"Not tomorrow," I said. Not ever, I wanted to say. But I was beginning to know better; if you sounded like something was too much for you, it just got ol' Janet charged up to prove you were wrong. What was it she'd come up with today? *You never know what you can do—till you do it.* Hah, that sounded like a Kernan, all right!

It was getting pretty late when I eased home for lunch. I tried to make myself invisible, hoping I could clean up before Mrs. Moffett got a real good look at me. No use. She was right square in front of the door when I opened it.

"Hi," I said, "you here already? Didn't know it was that late." I was aiming at a nice jolly tone, like I'd been shooting marbles or something, having such fun I forgot the time. That pained steady stare of hers told me I might as well have saved my act for the stage.

"Oh, Robbie," she said. And just when I expected to get creamed, she turned toward the kitchen, saying only, "Better wash those scratches with soap. I hope you weren't near any poison oak."

Well, that was a switch! I puzzled over it while I cleaned up. She was acting like Dad had the day

I got sunburned—as though they were both thinking a lot of things they weren't saying. As though they'd agreed not to say them.

I wondered uneasily what it was they knew. Or thought they knew.

22

Tuesday started out dumb, *dumb.*

At breakfast, Dad was pretty silent, but I caught him looking at me now and then as though there was a lot he could say, if he wanted to. I had a feeling Mrs. Moffett had buttonholed him, soon as he got home last night, for a big conference about me. Like, "He was gone again today. Came home looking just terrible. Where does he go when he disappears like that? What is he doing? Something's up." Buzz, buzz, buzz . . . and every buzz getting a little closer to the truth.

Well, I couldn't just sit and eat with Dad studying me like that, so I grabbed a roll and said, "See ya," and bolted out of there.

I decided maybe I'd go berry picking again after all. Sure wouldn't hurt to have more money ahead.

Who knew *how* many film packs I'd have to buy and develop before I got the kind of picture I wanted? So I went across the street to tell ol' Janet the good news that we could go get scratched to death all over again . . .

And found that Junie was due home on the 10 A.M. bus (a day earlier than the Kernans had expected him), and ol' Janet wasn't going anyplace but down to that bus station.

Right then I could see the whole dumb week stretching ahead, with Janet not wanting to do anything but kangaroo hop around Junie, hearing all about Outward Bound and how wonderful it was and how wonderful Junie was. And when she did have time for me, that's all I'd hear, too—song poems about Junie. Boy, he might as well be Ulysses coming home from the Trojan wars!

I went back to get my bike out of the garage, checking first to be sure the camera (under my sweater in the basket) had plenty of film in it. When I pushed the bike out to the driveway, Dad was getting into his car.

"Off again?" he asked. Just a casual question, but it didn't sound casual. And his glance at the hump in my bike basket didn't look casual, either. It was like he had X-ray eyes and could see right through the sweater. I could feel my ears getting hot and red.

"Yeh," I mumbled, and swung quick onto the bike—so quick I almost tipped it over. And wouldn't that've been something? There'd be the camera spilled out on the driveway, and Dad

wouldn't have to guess any longer what I was doing. He'd know.

But I kept my balance and swished into the street like an old pro and didn't ease up on the pedals till I knew I was out of sight.

Whew, I thought then, slowing down for a breather, *I better get a good picture soon, and I mean soon. Isn't gonna take Dad much longer to figure out what's going on. He's plenty suspicious already . . .*

He and Mrs. Moffett. Buzz, buzz, buzzzz.

Taking a picture with a story to it sure wasn't the same thing as taking a picture. Wow, the miles I biked just looking for one! I didn't want to waste film, so I studied every view real hard before I snapped the shutter. Did it tell a story? Did it make me feel anything at all when I looked at it? Except tired and dusty and hot and mad?

I began to get an idea of why Dad could forget to come home from a Saturday picture-taking trip. How many hours had he hung around the park to get that picture of the kid bawling for his balloon? Picture taking (I suspected) was ninety-nine percent patience.

I dragged home finally, the whole morning wasted and only a couple of dumb shots to show for it. Dumb, dumb, that described the whole stupid business. Why didn't I give up? Leave the camera in plain sight on my bookshelf and let it gather dust? That'd tell Dad—and Mrs. Moffett, too—what I thought about it. Dumb, *dumb.*

But I left the camera in my bike basket when I went in for lunch.

Mrs. Moffett twittered around me like I was a hospital patient just trying out his legs after a critical illness. "Robbie, surely you're going to eat more than that! Out all day, burned brown as a gypsy, and getting so thin. Robbie, you aren't leaving this table till you eat another sandwich!"

I was stuffed to the eyebrows. I said, "That's all right, I'll take it with me," and went upstairs to get some money.

Mrs. Moffett pattered right after me. "Robbie, where are you going?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" I didn't take time to count the change I wanted, just dumped the whole lot in my pocket. "Out, that's all. Just out." If I didn't put distance between me and Mrs. Moffett pretty quick, I'd get twittered to death.

Across the street, the Kernan house was busting with sound, about what you'd expect with Junie home. I wondered glumly how long it'd take ol' Janet to simmer down and think about anything else. The rest of the summer?

Well, I could get twittered to death at home or shouted deaf across the street—what a choice! Better just keep moving.

So I biked down to the gas station and got air in my tires, and I went around to Mr. Bertleson's store and bought some candy bars, just to be doing something. I biked past the park to see if maybe somebody was throwing a ball around, but nobody was —anyway, nobody over four years old. And finally

I aimed toward home again, going real slow, taking the long way 'round, figuring I must have used up more'n half the afternoon. Maybe it was safe to go home now; maybe Mrs. Moffett had stopped twittering.

Whether she had or not, I didn't find out. Two or three blocks from home, I saw Mike steaming along. He flagged me down.

"Puppy's gone!" he yelled.

So what else was new? I said, "Well, go tell Janet. Or Tim."

"They're gone!" Mike bawled. "With Junie to Grandma's. *You* find Long John!"

Sure I would. That was my very favorite way to spend a hot afternoon, especially when I was already saddle sore from riding this dumb bike.

"He'll come home," I said. "He ought to know his way by this time."

Mike bawled louder. "No, he won't! He's lost! Poor puppy!"

Poor puppy—hah, that was a good one! Having the time of his life probably, chasing squirrels, sniffing at chipmunk holes, barking at robins, getting his coat tangled with more thorns . . .

"Okay, quit yellin'," I sighed. "I'll find him."

Mike's tears turned off like a faucet. "Okay," he said, and trotted happily off toward home.

Disgustedly, I swung the bike around and headed for Black Butte. The butte was the best bet; we'd found him there more times than not.

"Long John!" I called, just on the chance he was somewhere closer. "Hey, Long John!" And I

whistled loud enough to be heard around two square blocks.

No answer. No sign of a thick gold-and-brown coat. No excited puppy bark from the bushes along the way.

"Long John!" I bellowed, and then saved my breath for pedaling.

23

I got all the way to the foot of the butte without a glimpse of that ever-traveling pup.

"Hey, Long John!" I yelled without much hope. "C'mon out, game's over."

The bushes at the foot of the slope were dusty after a rainless month. I sneezed while I poked among them. Shucks, might as well give up; there wasn't any dog here.

Then I heard a rustle above me on the butte. A twig snapped.

"Long John!" I yelped. "Come down here, you ornery pup!"

Another crackle, higher up the slope. He must be following a scent—and if he was, nothing was going to yank his mind and his nose off of it but a

firm hand on his collar. Dawgonnit, I'd have to go after him.

There wasn't much traffic on this dead-end lane, but still I wasn't keen about leaving my stuff here. I rolled the camera up in my sweater, knotted the sleeves around my middle, then shoved the bike deep in the bushes.

Up I went on the trail of those teasing snap-crackles. The path was pretty good for a while; guess a lot of people besides ol' Janet couldn't see a hill without wanting to climb it. But the path got steeper, and I got hotter.

"Long John!" I panted.

The only answer was another crackle, farther away and higher up. I plunged after it, the camera bumping my rear with every step. The bushes thinned out, and the trail was slippery with pine needles. I skidded a couple of times, and once I went sprawling. The camera swung up and whacked me in the head. Right then, I could've heaved it after that twig-snapping pup and gone home. Let Long John find his own way down when he was good and ready.

But I rolled the camera back in its sling, knotted the sweater sleeves tighter around me and huffed and puffed and scrambled still higher.

More twig snapping, not above me this time, but off to the side. I left the trail and went crashing through the underbrush. That dumb dog—what kind of scent was he on? Bear? Wow, it better not be!

Low branches whipped my face, roots tripped me

up: the pine needles were thicker. I burst into a little clearing . . .

In time to see a deer—a skinny young doe—disappear into the trees on the far side. Not Long John at all. No wonder I couldn't catch up with the crackles!

Something on the other side of the clearing—something startled by the deer—stirred suddenly in the fallen brush and pine needles. A bear cub? A snake?

I didn't wait to find out. I swung around quicker than a windmill in a spring breeze and legged it for the trail somewhere there behind me. That dumb sweater-sling snagged on the brush. I twisted around quick to yank it loose. My foot slipped on the pine-needles. I went crashing and skidding into a tree.

The fall almost knocked the breath out of me. "Dumb, so dumb!" I mumbled, scrambling to my feet.

Trying to scramble to my feet.

Pain shot through my left ankle, pain so fierce I yelped out loud and dropped back on the ground. Now what had I done? I rolled up my pants and looked at my leg. It looked straight enough, not bent where it wasn't supposed to bend. So maybe nothing was broken.

But my ankle was already puffing up and turning purple, and it throbbed like bloody murder. I sure couldn't put any weight on it. Did that mean I was stuck here?

In a quick scared flurry, I started scrambling on my hands and knees for the trail—but that was

panic, and panic wouldn't get me anywhere. I made myself stop and take a couple of deep breaths and think what to do.

My ankle looked big as a house. Big as a purple house. Whether it was broken or sprained, it ought to be wrapped tight, shouldn't it? To hold it straight or keep the swelling down or whatever? Seemed like that's what my Scout first-aid manual said.

So I peeled off my T-shirt and bound it around the ankle. At least that slowed down the throbbing. But I couldn't get very far on my hands and knees; what I needed was a hefty stick to use for a crutch.

There was nothing like that around me. Nothing bigger than twigs.

Back in the clearing, there'd been a fallen branch; —I remembered seeing the deer sail over it. But back in the clearing there was something else . . .

I didn't dare go back.

I had to go back.

24

The thing was (I told myself, waiting for my heart to stop pounding), there wasn't all that much to be scared of. Whatever it'd been, back there in the clearing, it was more scared of me than I was of it. If it was a bear cub, it'd already be long gone, legging it back to Mama. And if it was a snake . . .

Most snakes weren't poisonous. And anyway, snakes didn't go out looking for somebody to sink a fang into. If you stepped on 'em or poked at 'em, of course they'd strike back, but that was self-defense. Give them room, Grandpa said, and they'd go about their business.

Thinking about Grandpa made my heart slow down. Grandpa loved to watch wild things, even snakes. "Keep your distance and just look at it," he said, first time we came across one. "That's a bull

snake. It isn't dangerous; it won't strike unless it's alarmed." We'd stayed still as statues till it slithered into hiding, and you know, Grandpa was right, it was beautiful to watch.

Feeling a whole lot braver, I began hopping back toward the clearing. Slowly. Carefully. Hanging onto a tree till I was good and sure I could make it to the next one. Hopping made my ankle start throbbing again. The throbbing spread till it felt like my whole body was sprained. Trees and bushes ahead of me jumped with every heartbeat till I was too dizzy to stand.

I dropped down on my hands and knees. My head cleared and the trees quit circling and jumping. The pain went back to my ankle.

"Wow," I said out loud. My voice sounded funny in the stillness. Why was it so still, anyway? It was like everything was frozen motionless, listening to me, watching me. Like Grandpa and me, watching the snake.

I began to laugh. I mean, it was really funny when you thought about it. Wild things watching me like we'd watched them. One thing sure, they wouldn't think *I* was beautiful!

I got a candy bar out of my pocket and ate it slowly and tried to think. I wasn't so sure any more that all I needed was a crutch and I could make it back down the butte. Maybe I'd just have to stay put till somebody came looking for me.

That shouldn't be too long. What time was it now? Five o'clock, maybe five-thirty? Here in the trees, I couldn't prove it by the sun, but my stomach

was just as good a time teller and it said loud and clear it was almost dinnertime. Dad would be coming home; Mrs. Moffett would have things ready in the kitchen; they'd wait for me to show up . . .

"Gone all afternoon again," Mrs. Moffett would tell Dad. "Went out right after lunch. I don't know where."

"Maybe Janet'll know," Dad would say. "I'll just nip across the street and ask . . ."

And that'd do it. Mike'd say, "He went looking for Long John," and ol' Janet would come right up with the answer, "Then he must've gone to Black Butte. We always look there for Long John." And they'd quick find my bike in the bushes and start up the trail.

Yeh, wouldn't be long. I scrunched around trying to find a softer place to sit, leaned back against a tree and unwrapped another candy bar, listening all the while for voices and sounds of twig snapping on the trail. Ready to sing out good and loud, "Here I am! Over here!"

Wouldn't be long now. Anyway, before dark.

Dark.

A shiver rippled down my back, as if the tree I was leaning against was a column of ice. I said out loud, "Sure they'll be here before dark!" And again there was that funny stillness, like every creature on the butte had stopped what it was doing to listen to me.

One thing for sure, it was darker here in the trees than anywhere else. If I wanted to hang onto daylight, I'd better try to make it to the clearing. Dark-

ness was more frightening than whatever I'd heard stirring in the brush.

I didn't try to hop this time, just crawled on my hands and knees, stopping to rest when my ankle pounded too hard. I'd thought the clearing was real close—I sure hadn't run more than a minute or two before taking that spill, had I? But running was one thing, and crawling was something else again. At the worm's pace I was going, it'd be night before I made it . . .

If I made it. If I was even going in the right direction.

That panicky shiver hit me again, and this time I admitted I was scared. I mean really scared. I remembered all the stories I'd heard about people lost in the woods and how they ran in circles till they died, when all the time they were just a little way from safety.

Everything in me started to pound again. I was one great big pain. The ground jumped at me and then went far away. I lay down flat and waited for things to stay where they belonged. Then I ate another candy bar and thought some more. Why had I headed for the clearing anyway? Just 'cause of that panicky notion that it'd be lighter there. I should have aimed for the trail where I'd get found quicker. So which way was the trail?

"That's a good question," I said—only not out loud this time. That was too spooky. I had to think of the butte like it was on a map. The trail went up the east side, didn't it? So when I'd turned off the

trail—to my left—to follow the deer, I was going north, right?

So what? So if I wanted to get back to the trail, I'd go south. And in the woods (I remembered that much from scouting), you figured directions from the moss on trees. Moss grows on the north side. So if I crawled *away* from the mossy side, I'd be going back to the trail, right?

I finished the candy bar and stuffed the wrapping in my pocket, where the paper from the other bars I'd eaten already was. Quite a lot of paper, if I tore it up fine. Enough at least to tell me where I'd been, in case I started that circling business.

I felt better now, like I had everything under control. Crawl away from the mossy side of the trees. Scatter a little paper—not that I was going to come across it again, no, sir! I wasn't going to be so dumb I went around in circles. But just in case . . .

Crawling away from the mossy side of a tree meant crawling *toward* the mossy side of the next tree. Confusing. Sometimes I got mixed up. I got tired, too. My ankle throbbed, my hands were scraped raw, my knees were bruised. Worst of all, it didn't seem like I was getting anywhere. Surely I should have reached the trail by now. If I was going in the right direction. If I hadn't botched up the whole thing from the beginning when I was drawing that map in my mind . . .

Let's see. That dead-end lane leading to Black Butte headed east, I was right that far. And the trail up the butte took off from the end of the lane. So it was still going east, right?

Wrong. No trail ever went straight up a hillside. It curved with the slope. It wound around it and by the time it reached the top, it might be going west, for all I knew. Or north or south or east. Or northwest or southeast or southwest or . . .

I started to laugh again, loud and shrill. Then I yelled, "Shut up! *Shut up!*" Wouldn't do any good to get hysterical. I mean, I was getting somewhere, wasn't I? I hadn't crossed my own paper trail yet . . .

At least not so far as I could see. Of course that wasn't very far. It was getting pretty dark. I remembered how quick it got dark, soon as the sun was lower than the hilltops.

Soon I wouldn't be able to see the moss on the trees . . . or the paper scraps . . . I'd just be crawling blind, keeping on the move because I'd be too scared to stay still, bumping into things, going faster and faster . . .

In circles.

Was it lighter ahead? Yes, it was, it was! I wasn't imagining it—I'd found the trail! With a final burst of energy, I scrambled through the thinning screen of trees . . .

Into the clearing.

25

A big bird sprang upward with a wild beating of wings. Across the clearing, there was a quick flopping movement in the heap of brush and needles. I scrunched backward behind a tree, trying to shrink to beetle size, holding my breath.

Nothing came at me. But nothing ran away, either, nothing that I could hear. Whatever it was over there, it was staying put. I heard more stirring of twigs as it settled down again. Like a chicken in its nest.

Like a chicken? Like a bird!

Very cautiously, I peeked out around the tree. Not a thing in sight. I leaned farther out: a twig snapped under my hand. Across the clearing, a feathered head raised up from the brush. I saw the strong curved beak, the fierce, unafraid eye . . .

There was an eagle over there! Hurt, not able to fly. A broken wing? Shot, maybe? Some dumb hunter who didn't know it was an eagle—or didn't care. Who didn't go after it when he saw it fall to at least be sure it was dead. Boy, what Grandpa would say about *him!*

For a minute I was so hot and mad, I forgot I wasn't in much better shape than the eagle. Here we both were, shot down and waiting. Only I was waiting for help, and the eagle could only wait to die. Could a wing heal by itself? Even so, wouldn't a bird starve to death in the meantime? How long had it been here? That head had popped up mighty strong and fearless, not like something almost dead from hunger.

And then suddenly something my eyes had seen registered in my mind. There'd been a tail dangling from that curved beak—a mousetail! At the same instant, another fact clicked into place: that big bird I'd startled into flight, that's who'd brought the mouse! It was feeding the hurt eagle. I'd heard of birds doing that; Grandpa had told me—but even he had never actually seen it. Oh, wow, if I just had a picture of it to show him!

Not much chance of that. I had the camera but not enough light now. And anyway, I'd scared away the bird that brought the mouse. Would it come back again? Probably not before morning.

And I'd be long gone by then.

It was really getting darker. Even in the clearing, things were blurring into the same duskiness. And the temperature had dropped like it was desert

country. I untied the sling holding my camera and buttoned on my sweater. Just to be doing something, I set the camera on a firm hump of ground and focused it on the brush heap across the clearing. Couldn't see anything but shadows in the view finder, of course, but I could pretend I was seeing that fierce head rear up . . . and click the shutter . . .

Why was it taking Dad so long to find me? It must be way past dinnertime, but the butte was as quiet as an enchanted forest. Where everything had been put to sleep for a hundred years.

He *had* to be looking for me by now. And quick as he started looking, he'd come here. Mike would tell him about Long John—Janet would remember we always looked here first—he'd spot the bike. Wouldn't take any time at all after that. Because no matter what direction that blamed trail was from here, it wasn't very far. I was sure to hear anybody who was climbing it and yelling for me.

So why wasn't I hearing him? Things just had to happen like I'd said: Mike, Long John, Janet, the bike . . .

Mike was the weak link in that chain. If Long John had come home by himself, Mike could've forgotten he ever sent me after the pup. Mike was awfully little, and the middle of the afternoon was a long, long time ago.

Now I really began to shiver, and not just from the cold. The whole search-and-rescue plan I'd dreamed up depended on Mike. It started with Mike. And it could end with Mike—if he forgot.

"Mike, you dumb kid!" I yelped out loud.

"Think!" The eagle stirred and then everything was terribly still. Listening to me. *Quit yelling,* I ordered myself. *Somebody's got to think of the butte —sometime. My bike's down there at the foot of the trail. Soon as somebody spots that . . .*

'Course I'd shoved it pretty deep into the bushes. And not many people used that road.

All right, then I'd get myself down, soon as it was daylight. It'd take a while; I might have to crawl the whole way, but I could make it. The trail had to be somewhere to the right of the clearing, not very far. And for that matter, I must've left a trail of my own when I charged after that deer. I'd snapped off twiggy branches and churned up the pine needles and crashed through underbrush. Any dumb dope ought to be able to follow a trail like that . . .

Soon as it was daylight.

I swallowed a couple of times, real hard. My throat was dry as rusty nails. Must've been all those candy bars I'd eaten with nothing to drink.

Or could be I was scared spitless. Maybe if I came right out and admitted it, it wouldn't be so bad. Like watching the bullsnake—nothing was so scary if you just looked at it.

Okay, I'd look at it. I was going to spend a night on the butte, that's all. A summer night, so—no matter how cold it seemed—I wasn't going to freeze to death. Thing to do was make myself as comfortable as I could: scoop up a bed of pine needles and brush and snuggle into it. Like the eagle. Eat whatever I had left . . .

I scrounged through my pants pockets and came

up with the sandwich I hadn't eaten at lunch. It was smashed and linty, but it tasted great. One last candy bar—what a break I'd stocked up on candy when I was killing time. Lots of body heat in a candy bar. No reason to shiver . . .

Ho, I thought, *wouldn't ol' Janet be GREEN if she knew where I was? All the time wanting to go camping and stay out all night. Like Junie.*

Junie had done it. Junie had camped out—solo—up there in the Cascades where it was a whole lot wilder and colder than here. If Junie could do it—

So could I.

26

Night was a black velvet mask pressed down over my face. Smothering me. I sat up quick, trying to push it away, trying to breathe. My ankle pounded, my heart pounded.

I must've fallen asleep for a minute or maybe an hour; I'd sure been tired enough. But in that minute —or hour—the light had snuffed out completely. I had a panicky feeling that I was on the edge of a cliff, that if I moved a muscle I'd go tumbling into black space, turning and falling . . .

The eagle stirred and made a complaining sound and everything settled back into place, like I could see where I was. I felt the needles and brush of the bed I'd scratched up around me; I laid a hand flat against the tree beside me. It was all good and solid and familiar.

"Hi, over there," I saluted the eagle, but under my breath. I'd already disturbed the peace enough with my flopping around; didn't have to yell, too. But even if I couldn't talk to the eagle, it was sort of comforting to know he was there. I wasn't alone.

I burrowed back down into my bed, trying to scoop the pine needles over me. It was sure cold. Shivers started in my feet and rippled up my back and shook my shoulders. They came in waves. I hunched tight against them, pulling my knees up against my chest, huddling into a ball.

All I need is a nice bushy tail, I thought. Like a squirrel. Like a raccoon. I could bury my nose in it and lower my body temperature and sleep snug as a bug in a rug.

And speaking of bugs . . .

I squirmed and itched and hugged my sweater tighter around me. Seemed like all the wildlife on the forest floor was moving into bed with me. Guess I needn't have worried about being alone.

Soon as I was quiet again, I could hear other sounds. Night sounds. An owl, out hunting for food. A small night-feeding animal—possum? raccoon?—scurrying through the woods. The eagle heard it, too, and made a warning sound. But nothing was going to tangle with that bird. Broken wing or not, it could put up a mighty battle with those talons and that beak.

The darkness wasn't so black, once my eyes got used to it. I could see shades of blackness, with the trees dead black against the lighter blackness of a patch of sky, 'way up there above me. A star winked

on, like somebody had just snapped a switch. It looked so good, I could've cried.

But I didn't. I lay there as still as if I was part of the ground, as if I'd put down roots like the trees and bushes. Half-buried now in the brush, I could feel a spot of warmth in the center of me, spreading out, slowing down the shivers. The tightness eased out of my muscles. I looked steadily up at the star and wondered what Junie had thought about when he was on his solo.

At Junie's age, I guessed a guy'd do a lot of thinking about the future. Where he was going after high school, and what he wanted to do or be. Because all of a sudden he wouldn't be a kid any more. It was one thing to scrap for independence when you were a kid; you know the feeling: lemme alone; I can perfectly well do it myself!

But what was it like when you popped out from under the security blanket? Nobody to tell you to eat your salad and clean your fingernails and get home early. Nobody to cluck over your sniffles and take your temperature and make you stay in bed. Wow, it'd be like cracking a shell, busting out fresh hatched and ready to go! A big, free, lung-stretching feeling, as if you'd grown ten feet overnight.

A lonely feeling, too.

I was kind of glad I didn't have to find out about it just yet. Maybe Junie was ready to hatch—I guessed all the Kernans were readier than I was; they were born ready . . .

But I was getting there. I was a whole lot closer than I'd been a few months ago. Look at all the stuff

I'd tackled this summer that I didn't think I could do—I'd done it, hadn't I?

The star was moving . . . there was a branch across it now . . . or had I moved? No, I was still rooted, firm as a tree, growing down, growing up, watching a star swing and swoop and swell and fade . . .

When I opened my eyes the next time, the star was gone and the patch of sky up there was plainly lighter than the trees—a gray-black color, with the gray fading even while I stared at it.

"Hey, whaddya know, it's morning!" I said out loud. Birds took off from the trees at the sound, and the eagle thrashed in the brush. Then everything was still again. I lay there looking up at that grayness, watching it lighten to pearl gray, seeing it take on a tint of blue.

And then pink. Someplace down there, the sun was rising. No question about it, night was behind me. I'd made it through my solo.

Along with hunger and pain and itching and cold, I had a hint of that lung-stretching feeling. Maybe I was readier to hatch than I knew.

I rolled over to peek around the tree. Quiet as I tried to be, twigs snapped and that fierce head reared up to stare at me. My camera was where I'd set it last night, focused and ready. I flattened down on my stomach and put my eye to the view finder. Wow, what a picture that'd make! Was there enough light? This camera was pretty sharp; wouldn't hurt to try. I snapped the shutter.

And then snapped it again, as the morning got a little later and lighter.

And then—not daring to breathe for fear I'd rustle the brush and blow the whole scene—snapped it once more as a big brown bird, hovering above the clearing, folded its wings, zoomed in for a landing and dropped another fieldmouse within reach of that quick-snatching beak.

Click . . . click . . . almost out of film now; one of the pictures *had* to be good. The angle was just right to catch the action; what light there was came from behind me and centered square on the two birds. One more now of that uprearing white-crowned head, looking so proud and fierce and unafraid . . . click!

With a leaf-swishing beat of wings, the brown bird rose and disappeared. The eagle settled back into the brush with its breakfast. Still on my stomach, I wriggled backward into the trees, pulling the camera after me. Didn't want to startle the big bird; it needed all the strength it could get from that skimpy meal.

"Hi," said Junie.

27

"Didja see it—hey, Junie, *didja see it?*" I was so excited, it took a minute for surprise to hit me. I rolled over and sat up and gaped at the tall, skinny figure looming over me. "Junie! How'd *you* get here?"

"Just lucky," Junie grinned. "Spotted where you left the trail. Couple of steps later, picked up your paper trail."

A couple of steps—was I that close to the trail last night before I got turned around? Why, I could've spent the night there, feeling almost as safe as if I was back home. Knowing all I had to do was follow it down in the morning.

And then I wouldn't have seen the eagle. Or the big bird who brought him his breakfast. I wouldn't

have got those pictures. Wow, a couple of steps more, and I'd have missed it all!

"My ankle's bunged up," I said.

Junie dropped to his knees and unwound the T-shirt bandage. The ankle was purple and blue and swollen above a dead-looking pinched-white foot that I'd crammed back into my sneaker. It looked pretty awful.

If Junie thought so, too, he didn't say so. "Think you can make it down with me, or should I get a litter?"

"Oh, sure—no—wait a minute—" I was torn two ways, wanting to get out as fast as I could, but not wanting to leave the eagle to die. Because it'd sure take more than a couple of mice a day to keep him in business. "Junie, how do you get an eagle to the vet's?"

With Junie, I needn't try to explain why that old bird had become so special, sharing the night with me. Junie didn't bother with questions. He just said, "We'll ask the forest ranger, he'll know how." And then he boosted me to my one good foot and pulled my arm across his shoulders.

Hop, hop, rest, hop. In the daylight, even I could see the trail I'd left: broken twigs, scattered pine needles, scraps of paper; we'd find our way back easy to the eagle. Or somebody would. I had a feeling I wouldn't be doing much mountain climbing for awhile. Grounded, that's what I'd be. With Mrs. Moffett twittering over me, and ol' Janet giving me the hero treatment . . .

"Sure you can make it?" Junie asked. I was sway-

ing like a cornstalk in a breeze, getting more than a little light-headed.

"You bet." I yanked my mind off a vision of Mrs. Moffett and Janet bringing trays of food I could practically smell.

Hop, hop again, rest, hop—and we came out on the trail. Looked like a super highway to me. Looked at least six lanes wide. I could've whooped and hollered and bounced downhill like a rubber ball.

Junie eased me to the ground. "Might as well wait right here," he said. He made a funnel of his fists and sent a halloo echoing across the butte. "Your Dad and Janet are out there someplace. We spread out after we found your bike."

Dad. Janet. Till now, I hadn't thought of anything but the pounding in my ankle and the emptiness in my middle. "You found the bike—Mike *did* tell you!"

"Sure did," Junie grinned. "Middle of the night, he up and remembers you went looking for that pup. So we got hold of your Dad, next time he touched base—"

"Huh?"

"He was out driving six ways from Sunday all night. Must've worn out every road in the county. Took it into his head you'd set out for your Grandpa's."

"Wha-at?"

Junie hallooed again, and this time got an answer: a deep voice off to the right someplace, a higher-pitched one to the left. "Way he saw it, that's how it added up," Junie explained. "Said you'd been

working hard—must've wanted the money for something. And it wasn't the pup's vet bill, because *he* paid that . . ."

"Aw, come on!" But it made sense. That's what he would have done. Slip in and pay the bill and not say anything. Not wanting thanks; thanks would embarrass a guy who's kind of shy.

"So when Mrs. Moffett told him you'd taken all your cash," Junie went on, "and the guy at the filling station said you'd stopped for air, and Mr. Bertleson said you'd stocked up on candy bars, he figured you were on your way."

Yeh, that's how it'd look all right. Funny how you could feed the same facts into a computer and come up with two entirely different answers. Computers weren't so all-fired smart. Ought to be a better way to figure out what's on a guy's mind.

Like asking him? Groggy and half floating, listening to the crackling in the underbrush and another exchange of hallooes, I began to laugh. It was like I had a flash of this whole summer, and there were the two of us—Dad and me—circling kind of warily, like a couple of strange dogs, neither knowing what the other was thinking and whether he was friend or enemy. And not likely to find out till one or the other let down his guard and wagged his tail!

Junie gave me a worried look. "You all right?"

"Fine," I said. "Great." Just figuring how to wag my tail, that's all.

Because you couldn't always wait for something to come to you. Sometimes you had to go to meet it.

28

Ol' Janet knew all the time I hadn't run away. We talked about it sometimes; didn't have much else to do but talk, those weeks my ankle was in a cast.

" 'Course you wouldn't go, 'thout saying goodbye to me," that's how Janet had it figured out. "*I* knew that. So it had to be something else. Thing is, I should've guessed right away what it was. When I came home and there was Long John with his coat full of burs—well, he had to have gotten out of the yard, and I should've asked Mike if you went looking for him."

She slanted a glance down at my ankle and frowned at her dumbness. "All that night on the butte—when we could've found you right away!"

"That's okay," I told her. And it was. Because

if I'd got found any sooner, I'd have missed a lot of things. A whale of a lot of things.

Like the solo. A night alone in the woods. I'd never have believed I could do it. Till I did it.

Like the eagle. The forest ranger brought him down, hooded like a falcon, and his wing was healing fine. He'd be flying quicker than me.

Like the pictures. A couple of them turned out *great*. Dad's entering them in a national contest, and he's real proud—so proud you can almost see it. 'Cause that's Dad for you, kind of shy about showing much on the surface. But wagging for dear life underneath.

Oh, you know what? Long John's owner turned up last week! Seems he's a traveling man, only gets to Apple Valley about every six weeks. Last visit, he bought a puppy at a kennel here, and while he was calling on a customer, the puppy squeezed through the car window and took off.

"Figured he'd lit out for the kennel," the man said. "I didn't have time to go back, so I phoned them to hang on to Traveler when he showed up, and I'd pick him up next trip."

Traveler, that's what he'd named him. Spotted him for a rambunctious on-the-go pup, soon as he saw him, and that's what he wanted.

"And that's what he got," Janet sighed happily when we talked it over. "Wasn't it lucky we didn't take down our sign in the store?"

Because that's how Long John's owner had finally found him. He'd given up on ever seeing him again, after the kennel people told him the puppy hadn't

come back. But when he stopped at the store—Mr. Bertleson was one of his customers—that puppy picture caught his eye, and he read the notice . . .

"And now Long John's going to do all the traveling he wants to!" Ol' Janet looked almost as happy as Long John—Traveler, that is—had looked when he rode off in his owner's car, sitting tall and eager in the front seat, ears pricked up, his head stretched forward and his nose twitching.

The traveling man paid Dad back for the vet's bill, and he wanted to pay Janet, too, for all her care, but she wouldn't take anything. "We're just glad he's where he belongs," she told him. "Going places. Our yard isn't the right size at all for a dog like Long John—Traveler, I mean. It's more poodle sized."

"Poodle sized," the traveling man said thoughtfully, sort of nodding to himself. And I've got a great big suspicion that one of these days he'll turn up again. With a gift for ol' Janet. And I bet I know what it'll be.

Good grief. Back in the dog-chasing business again. Because Janet's crazy if she thinks a poodle is going to be one bit more satisfied with the yard than Long John. Any dog worth its biscuits wants to see what's on the other side of the street.

Sometimes there's a very interesting world over there.

Strange New Worlds

For eleven-year-old Robbie, there is the old and familiar world back in Summit, and the new and kind of scary world in Apple Creek.

Robbie leaves the sheltering home of his grandparents to live with his widowed father. Father and son are strangers, neither knowing what the other is thinking, and not likely to find out till one or the other lets down his guard.

During his first summer in Apple Creek, Robbie makes friends with the family across the street, the Kernan's. Janet Kernan is into baseball and bike-riding, and she becomes Robbie's best buddy and number one fan. Robbie's friendship with Janet enables him to try things he's never tried before. He rescues a wounded puppy, takes a job to earn some money, and spends a perilous night alone in the woods. Above all, he learns to accept his new home, and to understand the father who loves him.

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